

33½

Song Cycle / Van Dyke Parks



SONG CYCLE

by Richard
Henderson





SONG CYCLE

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Song Cycle

33 $\frac{1}{3}$

Richard Henderson



2010

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No matter how nearly perfect an Almost Perfect State may be, it is not nearly enough perfect unless the individuals who compose it can, somewhere between death and birth, have a perfectly corking time for a few years.

—Don Marquis, *The Almost Perfect State*

The compensation for the loss of innocence, of simplicity, of unselfconscious energy, is the classic moment . . . it's there on record. You can play it any time.

—George Melly, *Revolt Into Style*

I like to think it's just popular music . . . that isn't so popular.

—Van Dyke Parks

Acknowledgments

Taking it from the top:

I'm grateful for the congenial prodding of Dr. David Barker in Continuum's New York office, who commissioned this book. At regular intervals, he would fire a flare over the dark waters to determine if my *Song Cycle* monograph was still afloat. His patience, lenience, help and understanding have been nothing less than essential to my efforts.

Song Cycle was first released over forty years ago and, as such, exists on the pale cusp of recall in the minds of many who were aware of its first appearance. Impressively, and fortunately for me, several among those intimately connected with this album made themselves available for interrogation. Bruce Botnick, Doug Botnick, Stan Cornyn, Bernie Grundman, Lee Herschberg, Danny Hutton, Joe Smith, Lenny Waronker, Guy Webster and Steve Young were generous with their time and recollections of a charismatic young Southerner named Van Dyke Parks who turned up in their midst during the turbulence

that was the mid '60s; their accounts are intrinsic to the form and mien of the book you now hold. All of these men have achieved much in the four decades since *Song Cycle's* release, but their shared affection both for this record and especially for its creator is undimmed by time's passage, and is all the more affecting for being so.

Anyone with an interest in the golden age of Los Angeles pop music in the twentieth century is beholden to Barney Hoskyns, the author of *Waiting for the Sun* and *Hotel California*; I am but the latest in a long line of scribblers to admit as much. Hoskyns has done justice to the musical legacy of Southern California, his accounts informed in equal measure by passion and exhaustive legwork.

The following authors — Andrew Hultkrans, Ric Menck, Andy Miller, Ray Newman (whose *Abracadabra!* is a defining single album monograph), John Perry and Hugo Wilcken — have helped my cause with the respective examples set by their own books, each one lending vibrancy and a sense of renewal to music I'd thought was well past the sell-by date. Ian MacDonald, author of the most even-handed and incisive appraisal of The Beatles' recordings, left a legacy of trenchant observation, instructive to anyone interested in dancing about architecture. Mr. MacDonald is no longer around, sad to say; I should have enjoyed thanking him in person.

Gene Sculatti, editor of *The Catalog of Cool* and producer of Luxuria Music's *Atomic Cocktail* program, provided research materials and a reliable margin of reference throughout the gestation of this project. Gene, as an editor at *Billboard*, was the first person to offer gainful

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employment when I was a stranger in the strange land of Los Angeles. Eternally swinging and too cool for school, he is still my editor.

Kees Colenbrander was kind enough to forward a copy of his documentary, shot for Dutch television, *Van Dyke Parks: Een Obsessie Voor Muziek*, one more sterling example of Europeans doing right by aspects of American culture that Americans themselves can't be bothered to look after. Michael Leddy, whose *Orange Crate Art* blog is a VDP-friendly zone, was additionally helpful with research. How differently might history have played out, were Mike Love to have read Leddy's appreciation of those troublesome lyrics for "Cabinessence."

For their insights and encouraging words, I would like to thank: Michael Brook, D. J. Henderson, Erella Ganon, Stephanie Lowry, Cliff Martinez, Jeff Mee, Dan Meinwald, Ilka Normile, Tamara "Teemoney" Palmer, Sharon Heather Smith and Tom Welsh.

Dan Turner and Tom Nixon made the critical introductions, for which I remain grateful.

Finally, I am much indebted to Sally and Van Dyke Parks for their hospitality and neighborly disposition with respect to my nagging errand. Van Dyke fielded a great many questions with patience, wit and relentlessly impressive recall. He also pried open several doors on my behalf, stuck his foot out to ensure that they stayed open, shared items from his archives and cooked a number of stellar meals into the bargain. I can only hope to reciprocate in kind with this, a valentine to one of my favorite recordings. Most folks could die happy if they'd made a *Song Cycle* and nothing more. You've done a great deal

more, Maestro, in the process adding music and laughter to my day. Thank you.

Two people whom I'd hoped would enjoy a book of mine are not here to do so:

Glyn Thom passed away nearly two decades ago, though it seems like yesterday, and Brendan Mullen took sudden leave of the mortal coil as the manuscript was being finished. What I cannot articulate, Mary Margaret O'Hara has written and sung:

*And when a memory's all I've got
I'll remember I've got a lot
Not having you
But keeping you in mind.*

Photo credits

Photos on page 83 courtesy of Van Dyke Parks.

Images on pages 114 and 115 courtesy of Stan Cornyn.

This little book is for Nell.

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Introduction

Have you ever dreamt about a place you never really recall being to before? A place that maybe exists only in your imagination . . . You were there, though. You knew the language. You knew your way around. That was the '60s . . . well, it wasn't that either. It was just '66 and early '67. That's all it was.

—Peter Fonda, possibly doing his impression of record producer Terry Melcher in Steven Soderbergh's film *The Limey* (1999)

“**A**nyone unlucky enough not to have been aged between 14 and 30 during 1966–7 will never know the excitement of those years in popular culture. A sunny optimism permeated everything and possibilities seemed limitless.” So the late Ian MacDonald, author of *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles’ Records and the Sixties*, begins his description of “Penny Lane,” one side of the single that inaugurated that group’s most intensely creative string of releases.

I barely qualified for MacDonald’s demographic in

the years indicated, being a precocious 13-year-old who fancied himself sufficiently well-read and enthusiastic, qualified as such to run with older, more worldly kids. I was aware of the then newly opened field of possibility in culture that MacDonald describes. I just couldn't participate; in retrospect, this may have been just as well. But even to a kid on the sidelines, it seemed that something new and genuinely path-breaking happened nearly every fortnight. It was easy to take novelty for granted.

Decades down the track, Ian MacDonald's words still ring true. The chronicles of that era show it was a time of constant innovation, a kind of hothouse for mutant orchids wherein aesthetic movements blossomed, then evanesced in the span of mere months. With the memory of my own experience and the historical record for support, I'd extend by a year this golden age described by MacDonald. He in fact does this on the very next page of his magnum opus, allowing in a footnote that "... such was the festive atmosphere in English pop culture that disturbances in the political sphere did not intrude significantly until 1968."

It was a year of consequence, as all are by degrees, but 1968 was full to overflowing with events of seismic import. There seemed to be more violence than usual, an underscore to everything from colonial politics to the very act of being young. Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were shot to death, Andy Warhol nearly was. US forces massacred the Vietnamese inhabiting My Lai. Chicago policemen pounced on demonstrators at Chicago's Democratic Party convention. The University of Paris at Nanterre and Grosvenor Square and Watts

and La Plaza de las Tres Culturas, all became unexpected battlegrounds for civilians and police squaring off in the “year of the barricades.” France exploded an H-bomb, Czechoslovakia was invaded and, on a happier note for those who still cared, Elvis made a comeback. He did it on TV and, as I recall, karate was involved. Apollo 8 reached the moon in 1968, intimating that outer space could be colonized by Americans. In the same year, LSD was declared illegal in the United States, intimating that inner space could be cordoned off by the authorities.

The year 1968 was no less important in my own progress, as I entered my teenage years in a factory town. It was then that my parents gave me an FM radio, just as freeform rock programming began to contest classical music’s hegemony in that frequency band. It didn’t hurt that I achieved a measure of autonomy into the bargain, with enough money and freedom of movement to access record stores on a weekly basis.

It had been a year since racial tension, long festering in Detroit, gave way to the massive insurrection triggered during the summer of 1967 by the Twelfth Street riot. Twelve months on, the city was visibly in decline; it remains so. In a January 1 2003 *NY Times* interview, author and Detroit native Jeffrey Eugenides recalled his hometown’s Jefferson Avenue: “During my whole life, it was crumbling and being destroyed little by little.” He could have been describing the city itself. One simply became accustomed to things getting worse with each passing year, the civic infrastructure becoming ever more neglected and battle-scarred. And, sadly, one got used to the idea that it wouldn’t recover.

The city's core, while still commercially active, had already changed. There was a distinct vibe of "playing in the ruins," though at its margins there was liveliness in the makeshift retail sector cobbled together by area hippies: the repertory cinema where I sat eating Kentucky Fried Chicken through most of Andy Warhol's eight-hour portrait of the Empire State Building; faux-Anglo mod clothing boutiques (*Hyperbole!*); and lots of record stores. Raised on radio, I was drawn to those stores. I was still very much a novice, though, without compass in an ocean of vinyl.

My rounds of a given Saturday often took me to Ross Records, a dingy little shop in downtown Detroit's Harmonie Park enclave. This was a real record retailer, not merely a series of bins adjacent to where hi-fi gear was sold in a department store like Hudson's. The store was not so user-friendly as all that; clearly some decoding was in order, prior to making choices. I couldn't deny the feeling of being stonewalled by a language I didn't speak. There was much to decipher: the bilious, homely nudes adorning the UK edition of Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*; bins filled with "party albums" recorded by Redd Foxx and Moms Mabley, their sleeves darkened and gummy at the edges by years' worth of fingertips stained with testosterone and malt liquor; unpronounceable musicians credited on Indian records from the World Pacific label; Esperanto liner notes on jazz albums from ESP-Disk and, in ever increasing numbers, those "psychedelic" records.

Record companies were obviously doing a land office business with the latter. As I was equally new both to the

majority of this music and to the FM broadcasts where I might likely hear it, in the store I could only stare at the packaging and play my hunch. The records intended for the growing audience of “heads” had their own visual syntax, the common denominator being minor variations of showy, trendy, self-conscious takes on what passed for “weird” at that point in time — the gnomic visual language of newly stoned musicians recording for newly stoned audiences. The record companies’ art directors, themselves often much older, scotch ‘n’ soda types caught up in cracking this code, tended to follow the path of least resistance. Their “psychedelic” look invariably pulled from the same gamut of pastel colors in the service of manufactured bliss. The titles were spelled out in drippy, bastardized Art Nouveau typefaces inspired by *The Yellow Book*. The musicians might be portrayed as either visiting dignitaries from another planet or Hindu deities, or the mutant products of sex between Visigoths and cowboys, or the inhabitants of a Salvador Dalí landscape. If these bands weren’t from San Francisco, it appeared obvious that they wanted to be.

There seemed to be a constant, lurking subtext having something to do with the musicians in question possessing the Answer. It was as though coded messages pulsed from these sleeves: if you were as loaded as the guys who made the record — and if you bought their record — you would receive the Answer. I bought a few of these records, but not many; I’m still waiting for the Answer. In retrospect, I’m amazed that any of these records, the ones wearing countercultural credibility on their sleeves, spoke to me on any level. It all seemed so forced, even to a tyro like myself.

One Saturday late in 1968, I selected a record (based on little more than the questionable appeal of its graphics) and took it to the cashier. (For the longest time I couldn't have told you which album I'd initially selected. Perhaps because such notions are still in vogue, repressed memories now figure into my account. The past denied is liable to surface when least expected; so it is that only now do I remember nearly buying something by It's a Beautiful Day, a band that actually was from San Francisco.) I presented my find to the long-haired guy behind the counter; we had become acquainted over the course of previous Saturdays, as he patiently fielded my questions and endured my opinions.

Dan Turner was regarded as something like a Jedi knight amongst Detroit record clerks. I hesitate when mentioning his ability to summon the minutiae of an artist's career in an instant, or citing his rhetorical skills in gently flattening a customer's argument made on behalf of a substandard album from a band Dan knew could do better — to do so is to risk invoking a nerdy stereotype. Dan was nothing like the comic book store guy from *The Simpsons*, nor did he resemble the cutting, self-impressed characters staffing the shop in the film version of *High Fidelity*. Rather, he was quick witted and affable, definitely a character but someone with knowledge to impart. Years later, as the '80s began, mutual friends introduced me to the rock writer Lester Bangs during his final years in Manhattan. My knowledge of him was confined to a couple of conversations. Even so, it appeared that living up to the funny, raunchy, opinionated character Bangs had created for himself in print wasn't doing much for his health.

Dan Turner, by contrast, didn't have to break a sweat — a decade and more before, he already *was* that character.

Dan cast a baleful eye on my choice. Strolling over to the "P" bin, he produced a long player I had failed to notice earlier. The sleeve graphics seemed more appropriate to a poetry paperback than a rock album. There was a photo of the artist, a man named Van Dyke Parks, seated in a dining room chair, a very adult setting rendered in the colors of autumn. His look was best defined as "academic": tidy haircut, by the measure of the day; tweed sports jacket; suede loafers — though he appeared barely older than I was at the time. The signs and signifiers of his portrait connoted intelligence, that much was undeniable. He did not appear especially *au courant*, however.

Handing me the record, Dan made his point with scant few words, "You'll be happier with this."

* * *

And so, with little ceremony, *Song Cycle* entered my life. That Saturday proceeded as several before it had, and as would a great many that came in its wake: I returned home and dropped the disc onto the turntable, expecting to be entertained through the ensuing afternoon. That Saturday afternoon was different, which is one of the reasons I'm writing this book.

Song Cycle established its presence immediately. There was no warming up to it, nor was there any sense of time lost waiting for it to sink in over the course of multiple plays. Its music was nimble-footed, at times appearing slight as gossamer, while its lyrics often alluded to very

serious subjects. Sunny and pert, it seemed an album that could only be made by a resident of Southern California. Its lyrics were sung with the exuberance of youth (refreshing, as the average late '60s artist seemed intent on shouldering a burden of experience out of all proportion to his or her actual age), but these lyrics spoke of troubling subjects: racial inequality and dashed hopes and war and loss. Parks' songs spelled out many of the hard lessons of history, though often by elliptical means. The music floated between the speakers, a silver cloud with a dark lining.

Song Cycle possessed immediacy and verve and, most importantly, a sense of engagement with the listener. I hadn't realized, prior to this juncture, the extent to which most of the records I had played were set up to elicit passive responses from their listeners. There was nothing passive about this record. Posing more riddles than the average sphinx, with its decipherable answers pointing somewhere dark, *Song Cycle* was anything but passive. Seemingly implicit in its design was the beginning of a dialog, as though this Van Dyke Parks (whose name alone intrigued me, and had me wondering if his parents were both painters) was inviting a response from his listeners. Having already seen hippie bands play with their backs to the audience, the thought of late '60s musicians being interested in their listeners was a concept bordering on revolutionary. It was apparent that *Song Cycle* was crackling with ideas, seemingly all of them worthy of investigation.

The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* had appeared recently enough that "classically influenced

albums” and “concept albums” were being talked up in the papers; this last term, then new to me, indicated several songs linked via an overarching theme. Of course, Frank Sinatra had pioneered the conceptually managed sequencing of his albums as far back as 1954’s *In The Wee Small Hours*, but even if I’d known that at the time, it would hardly do to remind anyone about Frank Sinatra in the face of the Beatles’ achievement, late ’60s types believing as they did that their music erased the past and purified the cultural playing field. *Song Cycle*, in welcomed contrast, was a concept album that acknowledged the “better living through chemistry” era into which it had been released as well as the earlier, more romantic era peopled by Sinatra and his generation. In fact, by dint of its plain-spun title, *Song Cycle* indicated that Van Dyke Parks was comfortable extending his musical purview back to the original “concept albums,” the song cycles of nineteenth-century composers such as Beethoven (his *An die ferne Geliebte* is considered the seminal song cycle by most) or Schubert (*Winterreise*). In light of this consideration, rock records that claimed to be “classically influenced” by dint of featuring a cello or a flute seemed somewhat anemic.

Often the links of late ’60s concept albums were made literal in the form of unbanded album sides, whose music played continuously without break. Each of the dozen tracks comprising *Song Cycle* possessed defined introductions and codas and could play as stand-alone pieces, unlike the songs from *Sgt. Pepper’s* and its kin, where a song’s boundaries often were smeared with cross-fading and sound effects. But I never played individual tracks

from *Song Cycle*. Indeed, it wasn't so much a matter of *listening* to the record as the thought that I *viewed* it from start to finish, just as I would a film. These songs existed as appropriately integrated melodies and observations within their own right, but the album dictated its own presentation, a testament to the means by which its songs were interlocking modules constituent of a greater entity.

A chain of questions followed by answers: this was how composer and guitarist Lou Reed described the structure of his songs' placement on the albums recorded by the Velvet Underground. Van Dyke Parks seemed to have something similar in mind, though his discourse was often achieved on a more purely musical level, by addressing the mechanisms of his songs and designing flow and contiguity into melodies that would yield implied connections between his songs and the topics that they broached.

It was clear that Parks had an overarching design in mind. The signs were everywhere: an ingenious modulation from one key to another structured as a punning reference to some chestnut of Tin Pan Alley songwriting; the considered relationship between the chord sequence of one song's coda and the intro that followed; melodies, these sometimes represented only fractionally, resurfacing at intervals; the revolving-door array of instrumental timbres.

The record's allure was compounded by the intrigue of each song being set in its own virtual landscape, one created with specific textures of echo and reverberation and peripheral sounds — weather, insects, the footfalls and voices of passersby. It was the first time I'd ever taken notice of this aspect of record production. One song described a discovery in the family attic; reaching past

previous examples of impressionist composing, the song's acoustic contours suggested mustiness, rarely visited space, perhaps a lowered ceiling. In time I would read the press generated by *Song Cycle*, with at least a few of its favorable reviews marveling that Parks played the recording studio as much as he did the piano. *Song Cycle* introduced me, and doubtless many others who came to regard the multi-track studio itself as an instrument in its own right — and I would certainly include in this number the English polymath Brian Eno, whose solo albums of the '70s received the same accolade — to the potential of a record's production to suggest scenery and location, a sense of movement in the shadows.

Song Cycle seemed to play longer than any of the other albums I'd experienced to that point. In fact, at 35 minutes and 30 seconds, it turned out to have a shorter running time than many of my records. Parks was composing in the time-honored sense of the term and, expanding upon that notion, he was composing with the advantages and the limitations of existing technology at the forefront of his consideration. It enhanced the already palpable sense of adventure that informed the whole of this unusual disc, that sense born of the pooled imaginations of Parks, a prodigiously talented artist, his producer, a daring rookie named Lenny Waronker, and his engineers Lee Herschberg and Bruce Botnick, the technicians who, respectively, recorded and mixed the music of Parks' solo debut.

Needless to add, this resembled nothing that I'd encountered on the radio, nor anything that I'd heard in the collections of other kids I knew who liked music.

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The only comparisons available to me — and even these connections were tenuous at best — were to the records my father enjoyed. For most adolescents at that juncture in history, such a realization might be a deal breaker, full stop. Luckily for me, it was through his record collection that my father stayed in touch with his inner nonconformist. The crisp diction of *Song Cycle*'s vocalist was comparable only to the diamond-cutting consonants of jazz singer Blossom Dearie, and the engaging wordplay of Parks' lyrics reminded me of my dad's beloved Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (the D'Oyly Carte recordings for which he literally sold blood in order to afford during his college years). There was nothing ostensibly comedic about *Song Cycle*, though it was undeniably witty. It often moved at a dizzying clip and the painstaking craftsmanship evident in its recording seemed somehow related to the albums of double-time musical slapstick crafted by Spike Jones and his City Slickers, that successful "novelty act" of the '50s whose records were in heavy rotation on the paternal hi-fi.

The spit-polished calypso of Harry Belafonte was also heard frequently in our living room, as it was in many homes from the end of the Eisenhower era onward. During those years, when most of the prime movers from the first great era of rock either had died or were neutralized for various reasons, many record company moguls bought into the thought that calypso would emerge as the next vogue in popular listening tastes. That didn't happen, but it still amazes me to contemplate that from the late '50s into the early '60s, Louis Farrakhan, Maya Angelou and the actor Robert Mitchum, among others, tried to

launch their respective recording careers by interpreting the popular song forms of Trinidad. Calypso was a transient blip on America's cultural radar, but it made a lasting impression in my family home, just as it would on Van Dyke Parks, who was introduced to the vivacious sounds of the Caribbean when he was beginning a career as a folk musician in California. Calypso's fingerprints were untraceable on Parks' first album, but that music would reassert its thrall at later intervals in his career; again, I had no way to know any of this in the moment of my coming to terms with *Song Cycle*.

Indeed, what I didn't know was probably helpful in my engaging directly with this record. The Beach Boys' singles were a part of my environment as they were everyone's, but when I first encountered *Song Cycle* I had no knowledge of Parks' collaborative involvement with *SMiLE*, the anticipated masterwork of Beach Boys' composer/producer Brian Wilson, nor could I have known that *SMiLE* and Wilson himself were derailed for all intents and purposes by that point. I was unaware of Parks' resume as a session player, his credits so remarkable for a player barely out of his teens; prior to making *Song Cycle*, he was already a denizen of Hollywood's recording studios, contributing to benchmark recordings by Judy Collins, The Byrds, Paul Revere and the Raiders, Tim Buckley and many others.

In short, I was probably an ideal audience for the premiere offering by Van Dyke Parks, budding solo artist. I came to the record without preconceptions. What I lacked in education, I made up for in part with curiosity and open-mindedness. I didn't need to dance to his

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music. I didn't miss the appropriation of blues motifs by excessively amplified guitarists from England, as seemed essential to every other release in that period. I didn't need it to rock. For my money, if a record could rewrite the laws of physics to suit its own needs, and successfully adhere to those revised laws for the duration of its running time, I'd tag along wherever it led me. I became aware during its first play that *Song Cycle* would become a constant companion, well before the stylus hit the run-out groove at the end of its B-side.

Evidenced from what I heard that Saturday afternoon, Van Dyke Parks seemed happy to be following his own script, heedless of prevailing fashion; it's nearly impossible nowadays to exaggerate the appeal this quality held in the late '60s. It certainly worked for me, up to the point when I returned to the store in a vain effort to find more records that sounded like *Song Cycle*. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any. Four decades onward, I'll admit to still looking and will attest that there are no facsimiles, reasonable or otherwise, to be had. Desperate — and I can't believe that I thought this might pay off — I stooped to auditioning albums made by musicians with weird names. This led nowhere in a hurry. Lincoln Mayorga, for instance, was an accomplished keyboardist who also did extensive session work for pop records. I checked out one of his solo LPs, encouraged by the fact of it being released by an audiophile record label, my first encounter with such a thing. Though he played on a Phil Ochs album to which Parks also contributed, I found out in short order that Mayorga did not have a *Song Cycle* within him. So much for *that* idea.

Intrinsic to the pop music of my youth was the notion of songs designed as a series of disposable experiences; whether much has changed in that regard during the past 40 years is open to conjecture. Many of the records that I bought during that first year engaged my attention for a matter of weeks, maybe months, and then they were relegated to the shelf, rarely to be revisited. That was fine, as they were intended to do that. *Song Cycle* represented unfinished business on some level. It demanded repeat visits. In a time when the turnover in fashion, either sartorial or musical, was especially — indeed brutally — rapid, this curious record built with string sections and keyboards and the boyish tenor singing voice of its author often as not would divert my attention from newer records that I'd bought. It would continue to do this for many years thereafter.

Song Cycle was, itself, ostensibly pop music, if only for being released by Warner Bros. Records, a label concerned for the most part with pop music. (The album was provisionally titled *Looney Tunes*, a nod to the antic cartoons famously associated with Warners' film division.) I bought many albums during my first year of involvement with recorded music; many of those were on Warners or its affiliated label Reprise (an imprint started by Frank Sinatra in 1960 after his departure from Capitol Records, and three years later sold to Warners). There seemed overall to be a vein of intelligence and risk-taking common to many of the releases from these two labels. Enthusiasts of jazz and classical music had long hewed to their own specific brand loyalties. Through the decade previous to my coming of age, fans of rock and

pop had sworn allegiance to Sam Phillips' Sun Records; a few years later a different crowd would hew to the sunny orange and yellow swirl emblazoned on Capitol Records singles, identifiable with phenomenally popular releases from the Beach Boys or the Beatles. Many of the artists in the Warners/Reprise stable seemed to share an impracticable worldview, at once doe-eyed optimistic and, in the next moment, cynical and dystopian. In other words, Warners seemed like a safe haven for artists with complexity and depth of character, humans whose music as often as not required patience and investment of time on the listener's part. Yet this music, the stuff of *Song Cycle* and specific other Warners/Reprise albums released in its wake, was still pop music at core. In the course of trying to puzzle out this conundrum, brand loyalty asserted itself within my own tastes and that of numerous others within my age group. As several record-collecting members of said demographic would in time form their own bands and sign with Warner Bros. Records and move a great many units at retail — R.E.M. comes readily to mind in this context — cultivating their allegiance would pay handsome dividends for the label in the years to come.

In the years that have elapsed since the late '60s, I have spent much time and energy evangelizing on behalf of my favorite music, just like so many (regrettably, most of them male) members of my birth cohort. It was something that we did, and that some of us still do even now, in an unexamined way. Attendant to this activity is a peculiar inverse ratio of received apathy scaled against passionate intentions, one that describes my lack of success converting others to the cause of artists whom I care

most about. My list is different than yours, no doubt, but the frustration is doubtless the same.

Of course, my toughest sell has always been Van Dyke Parks. It's not like I'm alone in this regard, either. If he wasn't the first example of that doomed breed known as Cult Artists, adored by critics yet all but ignored by paying customers, he was certainly the best publicized. *Song Cycle* generated more than its fair share of bouquets — “Charles Ives in Groucho Marx’s pajamas” has long been a favorite — and more than a few brickbats in the press of its day. I’ve pored over many reviews from the time of *Song Cycle*’s release in the course of researching this book. Reading these, and ignoring history for the moment, it’s easy to assume that the album would write its own ticket with record buyers and Warner Bros. shareholders alike, and that its author’s progress was assured. It didn’t turn out that way. But when I read the reviews that give the impression their writers’ lives had been markedly improved by the existence of *Song Cycle*, I feel compelled to join the chorus and try to present its case, even at this late date. My attempt to do so may resemble the joke about playing the country and western record backward: Your girl comes back, your dog doesn’t die, your pickup runs like a top and, in this case, your deeply personal *wunderkammern* of an album becomes a success. I can only try.

Weird but true: during the last couple of decades, the impression is deeply received that European and Japanese audiences appreciate Parks’ solo work more than his own compatriots do. All of his writing has struck me as American to the bone, so much so that I’ve assumed it to

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be undecipherable by foreign audiences. So when a Dutch street orchestra performs “Jack Palance,” the calypso tune personalized by Parks on his second album, or when Parks is accosted repeatedly on the streets of Tokyo by fans, or when he merits a standing ovation at London’s Festival Hall merely for taking his seat at the world premiere of Brian Wilson’s *SMiLE*, I’m glad for him — doubtless he knows how it feels to be left on the shelf — but it’s all the more bewildering to me. Once I made reference to Parks during an interview with the English singer-songwriter Robert Wyatt, another personal favorite who’s a tough sell for the uninitiated; in his companionable Home Counties accent, Wyatt stopped me mid-phrase, cautioning: “Careful now — that’s a *proper* musician you’re talking about.”

As mentioned, I bought many records in 1968. Irrespective of which record company released them, *Song Cycle* remains the only one purchased then that yields the same amount of satisfaction for me in the present day.

I Came West Unto Hollywood . . .

Show up on time! Something my father always told me when I was younger. "Son, show up on time and you'll always have a job." A job is an important thing.

—Wynton Marsalis, from his commencement address to the American Boychoir School Class of '93

In the course of working as a music supervisor for film, on occasion I have had to hire an arranger, someone with the full chromatic palette of an orchestra's resources in his or her mind and imagination sufficient to doll up a particular song or film cue. It's a fairly rote procedure: The candidate's resume is scrutinized; examples of their drafts and completed scores are reviewed; their piano playing might be auditioned. The usual pragmatic considerations are made about personality and the fine-hair distinctions between the various applicants' respective skill sets, peculiar to the needs of concert halls and recording studios. Their shoes might receive critical consideration; the

selection process is far from an exact science. To that end, I'm obliged as well to consider the opinions of film directors and producers and score composers in these situations.

Let's dream together for a moment and imagine that the choice of arranger boiled down to just my druthers. Sizing up the candidates for a particular job, I discover that one of them had been an accomplished *saucier* in his parents' kitchen at nine years of age, with the ability to knock out a restaurant-grade hollandaise. I'd probably tell the other candidates that they could just go home. Of course, this would mean that Van Dyke Parks had applied for the gig and nailed it.

His culinary abilities were in fact honed at an early age in his parents' home, in tandem with the development of a pronounced musical aptitude. The second quality wasn't unique to the very young Van Dyke. He was born in 1943, a child of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, save for a stopover in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Van Dyke was the youngest of four boys, the entire brood bearing musical inclinations. His older brothers played brass instruments; Van Dyke took up playing the clarinet at about the age of four. The family piano, which the youngest Parks played intuitively as soon as he could reach the keyboard, was soon joined by a second keyboard, facilitating the performance of eight-handed compositions by family members.

There was no shortage of musical or intellectual curiosity in the Parks bloodline. Van Dyke's mother was a Hebraic scholar. His father, Dr. Richard Parks, was a physician practicing the dual specialties of neurology and psychiatry, having studied with Karl Menninger.

(Dr. Parks was also the first to admit African-American patients to a white southern hospital). Van Dyke's father had been a member of John Philip Sousa's Sixty Silver Trumpets, and paid his way through medical school with profits earned leading a dance band he had founded, Dick Parks and the White Swan Serenaders.

The very young Van Dyke embarked on a career as a child thespian in the early '50s, concurrent with his term as a boarding student at the American Boychoir School in Princeton, NJ. There, Van Dyke studied voice and piano. He occupied a featured position in the choir as a coloratura singer, one who as a youngster could claim a range comparable to the Andean princess herself, that doyenne of exotic '50s pop known as Yma Sumac. The Boychoir acquired the stamina and professional rigor of adult performers while at school; they performed in every continental state during Parks' student years. Between 1953 and 1958 he worked steadily in films and television. Parks appeared as the son of Andrew Bonino (as played by the eminent opera baritone Ezio Pinza) on the 1953 NBC television show *Bonino*. Parks' roommate at the Boychoir School, 14-year-old Chet Allen, was one of his costars on *Bonino*. The very young Van Dyke Parks became friends with Pinza's son, and would visit the family home in Connecticut. (As Parks recalls, the Pinzas' doorbell played "Some Enchanted Evening.") Few children could claim the distinction of having been sung to sleep by Pinza, one of the twentieth century's greatest *basso profundi*.

"And introducing Van Dyke Parks," read the billing block on posters for the 1956 movie *The Swan*, which starred Grace Kelly. It's slightly painful to watch: the

film's director, Charles Vidor, seemed petrified of anything more intimate than a medium shot. It moves at an arthritic pace from one set piece to another, just so much badly filmed theater unencumbered by imagination. (That such a leaden vehicle should follow Kelly's triumphs in the Alfred Hitchcock films *Rear Window* and *To Catch a Thief* undoubtedly stiffened her resolve to ditch acting and opt for life as a princess in Monaco — which she did, almost immediately.) Among his other acting credits in the '50s, Parks had a recurring role as Little Tommy Manacotti on Jackie Gleason's situation comedy, *The Honeymooners*. He headlined with Eli Wallach and Maureen Stapleton in S. N. Berman's *The Cold Wind* on Broadway, as well as appearing on television's *Mr. Peepers*, *Studio One* and *Playhouse 90*.

Yet when asked about this extraordinary, very public childhood, Parks is wont to respond by dismissing the lot: "I didn't care about that stuff. I paid my tuition doing it, but I was only interested in music." Singing and acting in New York City enabled the young Parks to pay for his own schooling. To that end, while enrolled in the Boychoir school, Parks sang under the respective batons of Arturo Toscanini, Sir Thomas Beecham and Eugene Ormandy. Parks also performed the title role in both the New York City and Philadelphia Opera companies' *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

One of Parks' favorite memories of his student years in Princeton centers on his school's player piano, a 7-foot-long Steinway grand player piano that was situated in the loge of the Boychoir School's wood-appointed library; outside of the room, a great esplanade led down

to a 250-acre forest, with a salt lick for deer in the area. Sergei Rachmaninoff had visited the school, and played on the library's Steinway; he reached within the instrument and autographed its frame prior to his departure. Afterward, the young Parks could insert a piano roll cut from Rachmaninoff's performance and feel that he was sharing the room with the Russian keyboard virtuoso.

Another encounter with greatness occurred when Parks was Christmas caroling in the Princeton neighborhood adjacent to the school. Albert Einstein lived nearby; Parks recalls first seeing the preeminent physicist when both were attending a movie matinee. Hearing the young vocalist singing carols, Einstein brought out his violin, accompanying young Parks through a rendition of "Silent Night." Parks' adult life in music would feature numerous collaborations with a diverse, noteworthy cast of players, every one of these pairings a testament both to Parks' musical and diplomatic abilities, but he still rates this brief jam with the father of modern physics as a career pinnacle.

Parks' piano studies continued when he relocated to Pittsburgh, there to enroll at the Carnegie Institute as a music major in 1960; his major in composition and performance would consume the following three years. In 1963, he switched instruments once more, learning guitar (specifically the smaller-scale, nylon-stringed *requinto* guitar) in anticipation of his moving to California to join brother Carson in a folk duo, the Steeltown Two. Van Dyke had hoped to draw on his earlier training as a clarinetist, in order to land a job with the house band on a popular daytime TV show, *Art Linkletter's House Party*, where kids, to Art's ongoing fame and profit, "said

the darnedest things.” Despite his prowess on multiple instruments, Van Dyke didn’t get the gig.

Buried within the trove of vintage black-and-white photos published in Michael Ochs’ *Rock Archives*, tucked on a inside page in the book’s “California Dreamin’” chapter, is a portrait of the Steeltown Two in performance. Carson Parks, taller and visibly older than Van Dyke, lofts the neck of a baritone banjo above his brother’s head. Both are bespectacled and, in the manner of the early ’60s folk boom, wear facial expressions that show them to be as achingly earnest as two spiritual godchildren of folklorist Harry Smith could hope to be. Van Dyke described teaming with his brother for interviewer Matthew Greenwald, “We played all of the hip places to play. We played all the way from San Diego to Santa Barbara. We went up and down the coast and played all these places . . . It went for two years . . . At the beginning we were competing for day-old vegetables snatched from behind supermarkets. We got paid \$7.50 a night at some events. That’s what I got . . . My brother got \$7.50 as well! It was like that until we got a stand-up bass player and we went up to \$20 a night. Then we played at [famed West Hollywood nightclub] the Troubadour in 1963 and we got \$750 a week.”

It was during Parks’ involvement with the folk scene of Southern California that he would initiate several relationships destined to last through the duration of his professional life. For someone who had maintained a fairly constant and rigorously formal approach to performance both as a musician and actor since a very young age, the comparatively unbridled hedonism of

the folk scene in Seal Beach and points north must have appealed hugely to a musician still in his teenage years. “You had women in leotards discussing Karl Marx and the Industrial Revolution by candlelight . . . waiting for Leonard Cohen to show up,” as Parks recalled in conversation with Barney Hoskyns, “One felt the subtle encroachments of a narcotic atmosphere.”

Two events occurred during 1963 that clouded Parks’ activities through the balance of the decade and beyond: the deaths of President John F. Kennedy and Parks’ older brother Benjamin Riley Parks. The French horn player in his family ensemble, Ben was at that time the youngest member of the State Department to date; he died in an auto accident in Frankfurt, Germany, one day prior to his 24th birthday. A pall of uncertainty surrounded the tragedy, as evidence suggested that his brother could have been a casualty of the Cold War. Ben’s interest in Russian culture and language, however, would inform his younger brother’s musical exploration in later years.

Singer and songwriter Terry Gilkyson established his presence in the folk scene of the ’50s with his band The Easy Riders; it was Gilkyson who informed Parks of his brother’s death. In an act that Parks describes in the present day as indicative of “the compassion that introduced me to the music industry,” Gilkyson hired Van Dyke to provide an arrangement for the former’s “The Bare Necessities,” a song featured in Disney’s film *The Jungle Book*. Both Carson and Van Dyke Parks received enough money from that first union date “to get black suits and round trip tickets to the graveyard where we laid [his brother] to rest.”

Parks encountered Stephen Stills in this period, a Texan guitarist with whom he shared a birthday. Stills would briefly become a member of the Van Dyke Parks Band, along with a singer-songwriter from Alabama named Steve Young. A self-described “wandering drunken bum musician,” Young had landed in hot water with some junior Klansmen back home. Describing his exodus from the South, Young recalls “I found two guys with a record deal and headed to California with them.” Meeting Parks at The Insomniac, a Hermosa Beach coffeehouse of significance within the Beat landscape, Young was duly impressed with this compact, hyper-articulate fellow Southerner. The pair became lifelong friends, Parks still describing Young as “the kind of outlaw that Waylon [Jennings] wants to be.”

The Van Dyke Parks Band was not fated for a long run; their moment in the sun came and went in the form of a supporting act for The Lovin’ Spoonful at a show in Arizona. For the bandleader, though, his next move was to sign briefly with MGM Records, under the auspices of a minor legend of the ’60s, the Harvard-educated black artists and repertoire (A&R) executive Tom Wilson. Already Wilson had signed The Mothers of Invention (whose ranks Parks inhabited momentarily prior to the release of their double album debut, *Freak Out!*) and the Velvet Underground to MGM, producing both bands’ first albums in addition to his work with Simon & Garfunkel and Bob Dylan. Wilson was a lodestar for forward-thinking acts in the mid ’60s. His connecting Parks with MGM yielded two singles, both released in 1966: the first of these, “Come To The Sunshine,” contains the lyrics

“While they play / The white swans serenade . . .” — a reference to the dance band fronted by Van Dyke’s father. Another Parks single from MGM, “Number Nine,” begins with a fanfare for brass, resembling a more heroic elaboration of the intro to Bob & Earl’s “Harlem Shuffle,” then segues into a folk-rock retooling of Beethoven’s final symphony. Parks’ vocals are at first wordless; as the song restates its deathless melody, his feathery tenor floats the original German lyrics of “Ode To Joy” above amplified finger-picked guitar. The single was credited to “The Van Dyke Parks,” with its B-side (“Do What You Want”) a rare instance of someone writing lyrics for Parks; these provided by another new friend, a singer and Los Angeles native named Danny Hutton. Both singles came and went, garnering scant notice. All the same, within these four sides one hears, nearly fully formed, the template comprising lyric sleight-of-hand, vivacious melodies and pell-mell arrangements that would characterize Parks’ debut album, which lay just over the immediate horizon.

Of his first encounter with Parks, Danny Hutton recalls being invited to the apartment that Van Dyke occupied over a hardware store on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood. This location achieved its own notoriety in the day, functioning as something like a salon for Hollywood’s musical bohemia, with Van Dyke Parks playing host. “There was a ton of people sitting on the floor,” as Hutton remembers his first visit, “And there was Van Dyke, standing up with his shirt off, telling everybody how everything worked in the world. He looked about fourteen. I asked myself, Who is this amazing person? That was my introduction.”

“I learned his style,” Hutton continues, “People would

listen and then turn to me and ask, What the heck is he talking about? He's so quick and has such a huge vocabulary. He'd say something clever and while people would be trying to get his meaning, he'd make a pun on what he'd just said, that was really clever, then would stack a pun atop the previous pun. He'd do it so rapidly, his speech patterns were so complicated. Then he'd move on! People were kind of, oh, bombarded with meanings. *Song Cycle* was like that. He'd be saying one thing in his lyrics, and beneath that he'd be making a parallel reference in his music, referring to something from the eighteenth century."

Incidentally, not so very long after the encounter described above, Danny Hutton became a member of Three Dog Night, a very successful group whose run of nearly two dozen hit singles extended from the end of the '60s through to the middle of the decade that followed. There remains affable debate between these old friends as to who coined the name. A reference to an aboriginal index of extremes in chilly sleeping conditions, Hutton says he noticed it in an issue of the periodical, *Mankind*. Parks also cites anthropological sources to back up his own claim of authorship.

Van Dyke Parks branded a few groups in his time. Spotting the logo on a bulldozer while walking near his place with Stephen Stills and the other members of Stills' new, unnamed band, including Neil Young, Parks offered Buffalo Springfield as their moniker; the suggestion was accepted. When Warner Bros. acquired the catalog of San Francisco disc jockey Tom Donahue's Autumn Records in 1966, a band called The Tikis came with the package. Looking to banish associations with surf music, by then

decidedly passé, Harpers Bizarre seemed an altogether more sophisticated moniker. Parks, who arranged and performed on the band's debut album for Warners, suggested the name, "so that I could weed out my love of Cole Porter, Depression-era songwriting." Harpers Bizarre recorded an early Parks song, "High Coin," as did Bobby Vee, The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band, Jackie DeShannon and the Charlisans. They also recorded (one suspects at their producer's behest) a version of Cole Porter's "Anything Goes."

During this period, Carson and Van Dyke Parks inhabited neighboring apartments in Hollywood that could charitably be described as spartan abodes, their occupants forced to either vault the pay toilet stall at a nearby gas station or use the restroom in the hardware store below. The brothers Parks were fortunate in having Rita and Norm Botnick, the store's proprietors, as their landlords. Among his many accomplishments as a string virtuoso, Norm had been the longtime principal viola player in the orchestra maintained by Republic Studios. The era of studio-specific orchestras — and, by extension, Norm Botnick's principal livelihood — came to an end when Hollywood's major film studios decided en masse against renewing musicians' contracts in 1958. The entirety of Botnick's creative focus was on music; in addition to playing dates for Peggy Lee and Sinatra, he made violins and violas as a hobby. He was intensely practical, though; his relatives already in the business, Botnick established his own hardware outlet on Melrose, specializing in screen installation. His sons, Bruce and Doug, would become leading producers and engineers in their adult years;

as a child, Doug Botnick's French horn lessons came in exchange for re-screening his tutor's house.

Popular culture accelerated dramatically from 1964 onward, proliferating in myriad forms. In the wake of the Beatles' seismic impact on television audiences, The Byrds appeared as an American response. Their music married the harmony vocals and repertoire of an existing folk tradition to amplification and a spirit of experimentation extending beyond music to alternate strategies for living, radiating outward from the Californian landscape. A bull economy, innovations in birth control and the enveloping presence of a hydra-headed, constantly evolving intangible known as media, all became manna to young humans newly emancipated in the wake of a comparatively restrictive and monochromatic Eisenhower era.

In this period, Parks began to do session dates as a keyboard player. He proved himself adaptable to a surprising range of styles. That his credits at the time should include first albums by Judy Collins and an Orange County folk bard named Tim Buckley wasn't so surprising, given his own coffeehouse pedigree. Playing in studio with the altogether rowdier Paul Revere and the Raiders spoke well of Parks' versatility. Alongside him on those dates was a future label mate and production client of Parks, the slide guitarist and lay ethnomusicologist Ry Cooder. It's impressive, with credit due no doubt to the band's producer Terry Melcher, that despite the refinement and pedigree of their session musicians, the Raiders remained true to their origins as a raucous frat party band from the Pacific Northwest.

The Byrds also were among Terry Melcher's production

clients; at an earlier recording date, playing Hammond organ, Parks featured on “5D (Fifth Dimension),” the title track from The Byrds’ third album released in 1966. That year, at a party on the lawn of Melcher’s home on Benedict Canyon’s Cielo Drive, Melcher the star producer introduced Parks the eloquent session player to the Beach Boys’ bassist, principal composer and producer, Brian Wilson. (Melcher’s luxurious house in time would earn its own notoriety, following a 1969 visit from Charles Manson’s murderous communards.) As Peter Carlin elaborates in his Wilson biography, *Catch a Wave*, it wasn’t the first time that Parks and Wilson had met, but it was the first opportunity both had to converse at length and, more importantly, to size up one another.

Battered spiritually and literally by an abusive father and driven as such into a near hermetic relationship with music, the head Beach Boy was good-humored at root but was shy and very much an inquisitive autodidact, all too aware of his own lack of sophistication. Brian Wilson was a child of suburbia, his life diverted onto the fast track of show business at a point in history, in the years prior to the Beatles’ arrival, where successful teenaged performers weren’t accorded appreciably more respect than trained dog acts. His demanding family already dependent upon him to maintain their recently enhanced standards of living, Wilson increasingly sought solitude, sitting at his piano decoding the harmony lines of a Four Freshmen record and avoiding adults. Parks, by contrast, had spent his childhood in the company of adults, treated more or less as an equal; he had traveled extensively, was well educated, and while still in his early twenties was already

in possession of a resume that both musicians and actors twice his age could envy. Like a character sprung from the pages of Mark Twain's fiction, Parks had consortied with people of wealth and cultivated interests, had made a mark in the bastions of high culture (opera, Broadway) and low (episodic television in its infancy), but then he opted to hit the road. At an age when most of his contemporaries were figuring how best to lose their virginity and what to wear to the sock hop, of his own volition Parks had jumped from singing on New York stages to a hand-to-mouth existence performing folk music for the candle-in-Chianti-bottle set at the Prisoner of Zenda in Balboa, California, far from the comforts of home.

Parks' spirited extemporaneous wordplay impressed Wilson terrifically that day on Terry Melcher's lawn. In 1966 Brian Wilson was embarking on a new project, one born of the ambition and competitiveness native to a high school jock, as he had been not so long before. Immediately in the wake of their meeting at Melcher's place, Wilson asked Van Dyke Parks to be his lyricist for this new work. At that moment, in that year, Wilson was on top of his game, one of America's most successful and prolific songwriters. Parks was barely eking out a living, an itinerant session player negotiating Hollywood atop a Yamaha scooter. By enabling their introduction, Melcher engineered a moment of high consequence. There is little need to over-emphasize this, given that seemingly every writer concerned with rock and pop of the past half-century already has done so. Stating the obvious should suffice: from that day forward, everything would change irrevocably for both young men.

Dreams Are Stillborn In Hollywood

In spite of all the social pressures around us, we both appreciated the same stuff. He liked Les Paul, Spike Jones, all of these sounds that I liked, and he was doing it in a proactive way. I never felt I was sitting on the sidelines. I was swept up by the scale and prodigiousness of his activity. He did a lot of stuff and I was just hanging onto the words.

—Van Dyke Parks, discussing his collaborator,
from *SMiLE, The Story of Brian Wilson's Lost Masterpiece*

I mean everything you can write about it — and every fantasy that people have had about it — has been written.

—Danny Hutton, in conversation
with the author

Song Cycle's achievement has been occluded from the time of its release, effectively voiding out much of the scholarship that it deserves. One of the shadows that mutes its accomplishments is thrown by the large,

strangely amorphous silhouette of *SMiLE*, the Beach Boys album that should have appeared in 1967. When I speak of *SMiLE* in this context, I refer to the original incarnation of the collaboration between Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks, the result of Terry Melcher's match-making that later was notoriously abandoned by Wilson amidst band politics rife with discord, lawsuits, drug abuse and mental illness. Wilson, whose creativity once knew no bounds, failed to deliver his magnum opus. To some extent, the ensuing speculation as to what *SMiLE* might have been eclipsed the appearance of *Song Cycle*.

Much of the music press contemporary to *Song Cycle*'s release, and indeed the perception that lingered in much of the subsequent writing about that period, tended to emphasize *SMiLE* at the expense of the record that Parks created after he quit that project. The average summation of Parks' achievement in the wake of his work with Brian Wilson read, with minor variations, as "Parks left the troubled *SMiLE* sessions and made his first solo album for Warner Bros. Records."

Condensing the common story points, few as they are, culled from yellowed press clippings and thick volumes of rock arcana alike, it is easy, depressingly so, to conclude that *Song Cycle* was little more than an also-ran from the outset, a pale simulation of the glory that might have been *SMiLE*.

Yet hope sprang eternal from the legion of fans unable to let rest the memory of this busted project. In the decades following its abandonment, bootleg recordings continually re-sequenced leaked copies of the various music modules from which *SMiLE* was to be constructed

— these created by Brian Wilson and the cream of Hollywood's session musicians, the legendary "Wrecking Crew." Danny Hutton was right: everything, and I mean *everything* has been written about *SMiLE*. The fantasy that Danny Hutton alluded to was no exaggeration, but rather an impulse that actually resulted in a commendably inventive work of fiction, Lewis Shiner's 1993 novel *Glimpses*. Its plot concerns a beleaguered stereo repairman, his personal life in shambles, who travels back in time to help rock icons of the '60s complete discarded projects. A substantial portion of the story is devoted to the protagonist's efforts to aid Brian Wilson in completing *SMiLE*.

However, much as I'm loath to assume too much in my own chronicle of events, especially as viewed from four decades' distance, I will attempt to synopsize the debacle of *SMiLE*. I do so out of necessity: though that album was not released ultimately in its original form — it would be completed by Wilson and Parks with considerable help from Darian Sahanaja and the Wondermints in 2003 — its existence is part and parcel of the context in which one must contemplate *Song Cycle*'s creation and subsequent fate. I'm obliged to invoke its legend, as some may not be fully apprised of its significance (though it's hard to believe that there's anyone left who hasn't at least read the saga of abandonment, eventual completion and ultimate triumph of what, for the longest time, was Brian Wilson's *bête noir*). Ultimately, for the purposes of this book, the story of *SMiLE* throws light on the path that its lyricist, Van Dyke Parks, was obliged to take when the collaboration with Wilson went south. Parks' reasons for leaving weren't borne of naked self-interest, as will be

seen, but also were the result of consideration for Brian Wilson, a composer he admired.

So, in the event that you have been living under a very large rock for a very long time or perhaps were otherwise occupied acquiring a doctorate in spirit surgery at a nonaccredited campus in the Philippines, here follows a synopsis of what transpired:

In 1966, Brian Wilson asked Van Dyke Parks to collaborate with him on a new Beach Boys album, whose working title at inception was *Dumb Angel*; in due course the project would become known as *SMiLE*. Parks, whose effortlessly rococo turns of phrase had impressed Wilson, agreed to serve as the album's lyricist. Wilson was sensitive to the precarious nature of Parks' existence, funding the replacement of his scooter with a car, a Volvo. As Parks' extensive musical experience would not be denied, his contributions extended beyond lyrics; it was Parks who suggested the cello triplets that propel "Good Vibrations." That song formed the template for Wilson's working methods in *SMiLE*: multiple takes of verses and choruses were taped in discrete fashion over several sessions with the finished track the result of expert tape splicing. The pianist Glen Gould already had practiced splicing together the most accomplished passages of given pieces from Bach's repertoire, yielding performances of superhuman perfection. Brian Wilson, in his relatively brief career as a producer, came to regard the recording studio much as Gould had before him, as a retreat, as a means of total control in music and finally — to his own lasting disadvantage — as a technology of literal self-erasure.

Brian Wilson had decided to work exclusively in the studio some time before, his disposition proving too fragile for life on the road. The Beach Boys were left to continue their seemingly endless concert commitments without their original bass player. The group's cachet had slipped appreciably in America since the appearance of the Beatles, though in England their status was still at parity with what was then the world's most popular band. It was there that the Beach Boys were touring while their composer and producer worked on *SMiLE* with Parks in Los Angeles. Concurrent with the band's absence, Wilson entered into the honeymoon phase of his infatuation with marijuana and LSD; the bohemian Parks had already received his merit badge in alternate reality, but was careful to separate church and state, especially where expensive studio time was concerned.

Parks and Wilson composed a brace of songs, their quixotic contours reconciling modernist sweep and a yearning for rusticity. Their work generated something new under the sun, truly novel song forms as had not been heard in the American popular canon, yet felt familiar at core. The two collaborators often drew from American history, specifically the pioneering push westward in the name of Manifest Destiny, for both lyrics and the *plein air* majesty of Wilson's tunes. Among the songs they co-wrote for *SMiLE* were "Heroes And Villains" (written at a piano deposited in a very large sandbox that Wilson had installed in his living room), "Vegetables," "Wonderful," "Surf's Up" and "Cabinessence." Any one of these songs contained two, three or more songs within them, so varied and episodic were their structures. While

not lacking in the features (like melodic hooks) beloved of radio station program directors and music publishers, these were challenging songs, not easily digested on first pass and sounding nothing like anything that the public had come to expect from the Beach Boys, those profit-spinning ambassadors of Californian hedonism.

This fact was not lost on the band's other members, who were unsettled at best by the new material encountered upon their return to Los Angeles. Most irked by these new developments and by the strange crew of recently made friends now surrounding composer Brian was the group's lead singer (and Wilson's one-time lyricist), Mike Love. He took umbrage at the new direction in Brian's composing. The band's previous studio album, *Pet Sounds*, was already evidence of a stylistic left turn by Brian Wilson; while it yielded hit singles, its expanded palette of orchestral timbres and overall somber cast was off-putting to the fans who consistently paid for Beach Boys vinyl product and concert tickets. It was not an immediate success. Mike Love began to accuse Wilson, his cousin, of "fucking with the formula." The band's label, Capitol Records, obviously concurred, as they rush-released a greatest hits package as a form of damage control, nearly obliterating *Pet Sounds* in the process.

Now, confronted with lyrics that he deemed "acid alliteration," Love fought Wilson's new direction, to the point of trying to hold Van Dyke personally accountable for his lyrics. Citing lyrics from one of Wilson and Parks' new songs, "Cabinessence," Love demanded to know the meaning of the lines "Over and over / The crow cries uncover the corn field." Parks could not make literal his

own stream of consciousness. A bright spark, certainly one of greater candlepower than Mike Love possessed, Parks could see the proverbial writing on the wall. In short order, what had been a joyful meeting of minds degenerated into a chore and from there to a dilemma. Parks took exception to his shabby treatment, and Wilson slowly acceded to the will of his group. Talking to Erik Himmelsbach in the pages of the *Los Angeles Reader* in 1995, Parks spoke up on behalf of his creative partner, declaring that “[Brian Wilson] wanted to stretch and to redefine what a song could do. And he wasn’t allowed.”

Brad Elliot, with his helpful and painstakingly assembled timeline, “The Facts About *SMiLE*” published in *Look! Listen! Vibrate! SMiLE!*, has done much to winnow the apocryphal and preserve the facts of the matter. His scrutiny of the session logs from the *SMiLE* recording dates provide forensic evidence that might have remained otherwise unavailable. Per his conclusions, the denouement of the Wilson-Parks collaboration, and of *SMiLE* itself, played out as follows:

Having been upbraided by the group’s singer for concocting a willfully obscure libretto and growing tired of the increasingly flakey, unproductive nature of the *SMiLE* sessions, Parks left the project at the end of February 1967 after a significant contretemps with Wilson. Torpor, initially in the form of a fortnight’s inactivity, began to envelop the project. Many of those connected with *SMiLE*, the recently acquired inner circle of Wilson’s confidantes, had already departed or were ostracized amidst ramping paranoia and conflict. Wilson’s momentum and sense of purpose began to spin down. Now, Parks

was gone too. His absence left a void far larger than that carved by an absentee lyricist; Parks was Wilson's greatest supporter in the risky business of exploring the terra incognita that lay beyond songs about girls and cars and surfing. One could allude to any number of dreamers in literature and in life who defied the odds (or who, borrowing Mike Love's words, "fucked with the formula") in order to realize a vision; whether Cervantes' Don Quixote or Fitzcarraldo, the would-be rubber baron, said dreamer always had the support of a faithful ally.

Brian Wilson had given voice to his doubts as to whether or not the project could be finished without Van Dyke's active participation. Now, Wilson was obliged to confront that reality. What writer William Burroughs once described as "an area of silence" descended in a literal manner upon the once-bustling field of activity that was *SMiLE*. For the whole of that March, Brad Elliot's research turns up only a single session. The end of that month saw Parks return to the project; Wilson, with renewed vigor, also came back to the recording studio. In the fortnight that followed, sessions were held in April that would yield "Vegetables," a song whose internal contradictions were resolved with ingenuity and wit in Wilson's grand design: episodes of unabashed silliness set down cheek-by-jowl with harmony vocals arrayed in sustained, broadly spread chords, voices bathed in celestial reverb that spoke worlds about kindness and hope. The vocalists accompanying themselves by chewing celery, and the addled notion of listeners sending mail in support of their favorite vegetables might have been too much to tolerate, were the layers of vocal activity not so

cleverly constructed. These events and more were strung along the only constant in the piece, a slim, metronomic clothesline of a bass guitar plunking eighth notes with the throwaway charm of a kid chewing gum; interesting, in the light of the Beatles' bassist Paul McCartney having visited these particular sessions. "Vegetables" is one of the best-loved songs from *SMiLE*, deservedly so. If it was inevitable that the album, as originally conceived, couldn't be completed, at least this piece made it to shore before Wilson's effort and resolve slipped beneath the waves. Only a few days later, Parks once again absented himself, this time for good.

With chilling brevity, Brad Elliot pinpoints the moment of *SMiLE*'s undoing, "In mid-April, Van Dyke Parks again left Brian. He had been offered a solo deal by Warner Brothers and it must have appeared a more likely prospect than the completion and release of *SMiLE*."

Let's Assume That We Form A Company . . .

Everybody who wound up running that label had a lot of class. There was a style to Warner Bros. Records. They made good choices — frankly, I never saw them make a bad move. Everyone was always so pleasant. But, then again, people have a tendency to be pleasant if you're selling records.

—Phil Everly, on the Everly Brothers' years at
Warner Bros. Records, *Revolutions in Sound*

It certainly looked as though Van Dyke Parks had been given the keys to the candy store when he accepted a deal with Warner Bros. Records in 1967. One would hope that's how it felt for him, in the immediate wake of Parks' witnessing the demise of a project invested with so much hope and effort, seeing a cherished collaborator grow distant, confused and ornery (though one could allow that Parks just finally got to know Brian Wilson) and experiencing something close to physical intimidation from a vocalist unwilling to sing Parks' lyrics. To record without pressure to produce hit singles or meet touring

commitments, and be allowed to blaze his own trail with the resources of state-of-the-art recording technology and the cream of area musicians at his disposal; most artists of any persuasion would trade their front door for an opportunity like that. Still, the actual transaction — and it was very much a transaction — did not happen so abruptly, nor was it so simply parsed.

Van Dyke Parks connected to Warner Bros. Records through the interest of a young, untried producer, also in his early twenties, named Lenny Waronker. As described by Stan Cornyn in *Exploding*, his memoir of life at Warners, “Lenny’s credentials were born in the bassinet.” The son of Simon “Si” Waronker, co-founder of Liberty Records, Lenny had been a song plugger in the Metric Music publishing division of his father’s business prior to being installed as an A&R executive hired by mentor Mo Ostin, then president of Reprise Records (Frank Sinatra’s vanity label, which had been bought by Warners). In 1966, as mentioned, Warners acquired the Autumn Records catalog. Lenny Waronker was assigned to produce three acts acquired in the deal: The Mojo Men, The Tikis (renamed Harpers Bizarre by their producer, Van Dyke Parks) and the genuine hit makers in the pack, The Beau Brummels. Waronker brought in his childhood friend Randy Newman to assist (one of Newman’s relatives initially urged Lenny’s father, Si Waronker, to start Liberty), as well as enlisting veteran session keyboardist Leon Russell and Parks, the young guy whose name was already becoming known around town. As Fred Goodman summarized the wisdom of Waronker’s decision, “This was the beginning of a creative circle that,

with [Mo] Ostin's blessing, grew up around Waronker at Warner/Reprise and quickly became key to the company's success with rock."

Parks, still very much the inhabitant of a hardscrabble existence, was initially skeptical of Waronker's interest in his abilities. He regarded the fledgling producer as "a filthy-rich kid." (A generation's time and more later, when Waronker and Ostin were running DreamWorks Records in the '90s, they would sign — on Parks' recommendation — another young, multi-talented artist, Rufus Wainwright. A child of the road, by folk-singing parents Kate McGarrigle and Loudon Wainwright III, the younger Wainwright would express similar thoughts in his own time, remarking that Waronker was raised "with a silver spoon in his mouth" and as such might not have as much concern for Wainwright's financial well-being.) Parks' reservations were assuaged in part by Waronker's loaning him a Lamborghini sports car, but obviously it was Lenny's trust in Van Dyke's sensibilities that cemented the bond between the two men. That, and the contract he was eventually offered as a solo artist recording for Warner Bros. Records.

Waronker knew the worth of the crew he had assembled. "They weren't old school guys," he said, referring in particular to Messrs. Parks and Newman, "They were modern characters but they had old school values regarding certain records that needed to be made, certain artists who needed to be heard regardless. So there was still that going on. The fact that [Harpers Bizarre's single] 'Feeling Groovy' was a number 10 hit nationwide and 'Sit Down, I Think I Love You' [a song written by Parks' former

bandmember Stephen Stills, arranged by Parks] made the Top 30 on Western regional radio, that gave us credibility within the company. One hit will do wonders, two allows you to take chances."

These sessions also enabled Parks to deepen his engagement with emerging trends in recording technology. "We discovered eight-track [recording] with The Mojo Men," Waronker recalls. Parks crafted what Waronker describes as "a curious and wonderful arrangement, difficult to do, with unique instrumentation" writing out parts on lengths of butcher paper much in the manner of Jack Kerouac's original manuscript for *On the Road*. (In the liner notes to a CD reissue of the band's material, one of the members complimented Parks' inventiveness, while noting that the band got billed for several extra exotic instruments "that we couldn't even hear after the record was mixed.") Waronker's philosophy couldn't have been more congenial towards the efforts of Parks, or toward Leon Russell's approach to Harpers Bizarre's 1967 hit, the Paul Simon-penned "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)." That philosophy served to define a brief and unusual period in pop's history, where studios and companies functioned almost like greenhouses developing new and ever more unusual species of orchid, and when recordings of fundamentally experimental cast topped the charts. The modus operandi, as summarized by Lenny Waronker, was "Go in with a good song and weird it out. There's no sure thing."

As for the label itself, Warners, like many record companies in the Southern Californian landscape, was the musical offshoot of a successful film studio. Barney

Hoskyns noted in *Waiting for the Sun*, his defining history of the Los Angeles music scene, that Warner Bros. was “last off the blocks” to establish a record division; this tardiness would inform the new label’s fortunes from its founding in March 1958 through the early ’60s. Its mission statement was seemingly limited to capitalizing on the music potential of Warners’ film and television properties (the company’s popular TV show, *77 Sunset Strip*, provided the record division with its first hit album, followed by a single spun off from actor Edd Byrnes’s “Kookie” character, much adored by teenaged girls). Indeed, Warner Bros. record sales were sufficiently unimpressive for a lengthy enough time to have the powers that be thinking seriously about shutting that arm of the company. The Everly Brothers had migrated to the label from Cadence, who had issued the lion’s share of their hits; as Hoskyns notes, revenue from the number one hit scored by the Everlys’ “Cathy’s Clown” was not sufficient to offset a three-million-dollar loss during the company’s first four years in business. Warner Bros. Records was pulled from its tailspin by the phenomenal popularity of a folk group they had signed, Peter, Paul and Mary; by 1963, profits generated by the trio enabled Warners to buy the Reprise imprint.

Much of the company’s lunch money derived from the sale of comedy records. It moved a great many units of albums preserving live stand-up routines by Bill Cosby, Bob Newhart and an endearing nebbish named Allan Sherman, who lampooned the folk music fad and actually scored hit singles in his own right (“Hello Muddah, Hello, Fadduh”) that kicked off both a winning streak on the

charts for Warners in addition to a golden age of Jewish-American humor; the age in question, as pinpointed by Warren Zanes in his *Revolutions in Sound* chronicle of the Warner/Reprise label group, “made parody its favorite vehicle” as was certainly true of a host of other comedy LPs, onward to the films of Woody Allen and Mel Brooks.

By the time Parks was signed to Warner Bros., the company had just been acquired by Seven Arts. The film studio kept its original name, but the record side was now known as Warner Bros.-Seven Arts. Its president was a Yale graduate and former disc jockey from Boston’s WBZ, Joe Smith. He had arrived at the label in 1961, as head of national promotion, soon moving to head of the A&R department. The move to the West Coast couldn’t have come sooner, given his frustration at trying to open up the provincial tastes then prevalent in Boston to other sounds: “They’d have thought Joni Mitchell was black music,” Smith recalls.

He had played a significant role in establishing Peter, Paul and Mary as a favorite act on college campuses across the country and oversaw the gradual reversal of the label’s fortunes as it entered the mid ’60s. When Lenny Waronker proposed that his favorite session man be upgraded to a new solo act on Smith’s label, it would be Mike Maitland, then the president of the Warner Bros./Reprise label group who OK’d the signing of Van Dyke Parks.

Of his first impressions of Parks, Smith recalls that, at the time, “Los Angeles was a small community. Nothing happened without your knowing about it. Van Dyke already

had a solid reputation as a musician, and I probably was aware of his previous work in movies and television. You couldn't help but be impressed with him, he was so god-damned bright." The intelligence that made an impression on Joe Smith also helped Parks abrogate the guidance of A&R men that new acts were obliged usually to accept. "[Van Dyke] made such sense when he spoke, there was no point in putting suggestions to him. Besides, at Warner/Reprise, when we signed an artist, we believed they knew best how to [make their own records]. Of course," Smith allows, "Van Dyke was also very much involved with chemicals. He was a druggie early in the game."

And so it was in a climate charged with optimism that Parks entered into his extended relationship with Warner Bros. The contract that he signed ratified a degree of control over his own efforts that most film directors would covet; one clause contained therein — numbered 5D, coincidentally recalling the title of a track by The Byrds to which Van Dyke had contributed — guaranteed the young keyboardist/arranger employment with pay at union leader scale for all future sessions to be produced by Lenny Waronker. (To Parks' credit, he didn't hold the label to this during the rough patches he would endure in later years.) At the moment of his signing, roughly contemporaneous with Warner/Reprise adding the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix and Van Morrison to the roster, the twin imprints were well into an image overhaul. "We became the label that everybody copied," according to Smith. "It was such an exciting time in the music business. I still have the stomach X-rays to prove it."

Song Cycle

If you live in L.A., to reckon time is a trick since there are no winters. There are just earthquakes, parties and certain people. And songs. Though most of the songs indigenous to the city are similar because of their quality of smoothness which carries into the other entertainment/arts — the technical sheen of the movies . . . And Van Dyke Parks (a record man) gets so smooth if left to his own devices that the content drops away in his concern over the frame so that nothing could ever go inside the structure and no one knew where to look.

—Eve Babitz, from “Rosewood Casket,”
Eve’s Hollywood

Van Dyke’s musical genius just killed me. I didn’t think people could be that smart when it came to music.

—Lenny Waronker, producer, speaking to
Warren Zanes, *Revolutions in Sound*

SONG CYCLE

So, where's the 'Song'?

—Warner Bros. Records-Seven Arts president
Joe Smith, upon first hearing *Song Cycle*
in its entirety

The sessions that produced *Song Cycle* spanned seven months; that's how long it took to complete basic tracking for the dozen songs comprising Parks' first album. Lee Herschberg was the supervising engineer for the recording phase. Doug Botnick was an assistant doing studio set up during the tracking sessions, one of the earliest jobs in his engineering career. Doug, of course, was the son of Norm Botnick, the viola virtuoso who had once sheltered Van Dyke and his brother Carson above the family hardware store. When the album moved to Sunset Sound for mixdown, Doug's brother Bruce Botnick took over as mix engineer. Lee was gone from the project at the commencement of the mix, as he was obliged to take up the reins as director of engineering at Warner Bros. (though to this day, Van Dyke insists that Lee bought a summer place in Montana "to get away from my record.") Doug Botnick stayed on as tape operator/recordist throughout the mix, the sole technical staff member present through the entirety of the album's production.

The project moved seemingly to every studio in the Hollywood area, though it began at Sound Recorders with the song "Donovan's Colours." This would be released as a single, a trial balloon lofted to gauge the merits of recording a full-length album. The single was credited to one "George Washington Brown." Despite the enthusiasm surrounding his engagement with Warners, Parks

himself was uncertain about the validity of a solo career and was unwilling initially to submit his family's name to public humiliation, should this new deal go south for whatever reason.

It was cut to a four-track machine, then bounced to another four-track, much in the manner of how the Beatles tracked songs for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Finally, all the songs were transferred to eight-track for mixing. The tracking sessions, as mentioned, were of an extended nature; they weren't scheduled in lengthy, consolidated blocks of time as might be the case today, but were the result of grabbing unaccounted time in any one of a number of facilities sprinkled throughout Hollywood. The album's producer, Lenny Waronker, recalls hustling from studio to studio, both he and Parks carrying armloads of multi-track tape boxes. As he put it, "We weren't crazed over a particular studio's sounds. We were just looking for tape recorders, going anywhere we could to grab studio time."

An amusing footnote to this moment in Parks' life was chronicled in the pages of *Cheetah* magazine by Tom Nolan: visiting a recording session for the San Franciscan band Moby Grape, Nolan overheard musicians gossiping about "some very wealthy guy named George Washington Brown who lives in South America or something, and this very wealthy cat wants to make a record. So there is all this complicated communication between them, and Van Dyke is having him do it all over again, and he tells him what instruments to play and what notes and everything, and the guy does it, four bars of something on the piano, sends it back to Van Dyke who splices

it in, Van Dyke is mixing all these tapes together and everything, but it'll be this other fellow's record, because he's actually *doing* everything on it — George Washington Brown!"

As Warners president Joe Smith noted, Los Angeles was a very small town then.

Fortunately, the journalist Richard Goldstein heard "Donovan's Colours" playing on the jukebox of a lower Manhattan bar and waxed ecstatic in the pages of the *Village Voice*. *Song Cycle* was given the green light, but Parks would only be allowed to sign the contract and conduct business under his own name. George Washington Brown would have his final moment in the sun, the phantom nabob receiving sleeve credit for the piano part on "Colours." Goldstein would later lead the charge of writers praising the finished record, issuing a superlative-laden review in the *New York Times* that compared Parks to George Gershwin.

Parks' album was soon followed by the respective solo debuts of Randy Newman and one-time member of the Rising Sons and session guitarist Ry Cooder; Parks championed both artists and would co-produce with Lenny Waronker each of their first albums. This trio of records, plus Warners' concurrent release of Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, dressed the stage for the singer-songwriters of the early '70s whose albums of confessional songs would generate both significant revenue streams and points of pride for the Warner/Reprise label group. Though the albums due to appear in the near future from Neil Young and Joni Mitchell were the product of a markedly different approach to music — unlike the Canadian folk artists,

Parks and Newman were conservatory trained — the paradigm for the self-contained solo act was already in place thanks to Parks and company. Ironically, by the time James Taylor arrived and scored his major commercial triumph on Warners at the beginning of the '70s — the label by this juncture having perfected their technique for marketing an act like Taylor's — Parks would be ensconced in-house at the label as an executive.

* * *

In the beginning was the word and in 1966 the word was dope. Dope of all conceivable kinds arrived and spread very rapidly. It was either instrumental in altering the social climate of the young or was itself the most glaring symptom of change.

—Dominy Hamilton, *The Album Cover Album*

In the mid to late '60s, much was made of the influence of psychedelic drugs and the act of “storming heaven,” to borrow Jay Babcock’s phrase, with the help of newly rediscovered chemicals, some from the natural world, others from Swiss laboratories. Where these drugs promoted disorientation and panic in some users, others found in them an aid to exploring the minute, otherwise unattainable, working components of life. Sound, in particular, became a source of fascination when in the state described by Aldous Huxley as “having the doors of perception cleansed.”

Musicians followed surfers and movie stars in chasing the lysergic trend, and music began to emerge that purported to soundtrack the experience of what had been

dubbed by Beatle publicist Derek Taylor “the old heaven and hell pill.”

Psychedelic music seemed to appear in two distinct flavors, each one particular to dominant music centers of the day. English psychedelic music relied very much upon the resources of London’s recording studios. Songs began to feature some or all of the following: vocals and guitar playing printed backwards on the recording tape, vocals pitched radically up or down, the chimerical shimmer of phase-shifting with its jet engine/Doppler effects, and other varieties of manipulated sound. To quote the English writer George Melly, “Helped undeniably by the producer’s promiscuous expertise in the recording studio, the artist’s universe glowed like the first morning of the world. Objects appeared and disappeared. Metamorphosis became a commonplace.”

The psychedelic music generated by bands and in studios on the West Coast of America, specifically in the Los Angeles region, seemed more concerned with describing a journey to the antipodes of consciousness by purely musical means. This often involved elaborate arrangements employing archaic, near-forgotten instruments (e.g., the Marxolin that twangs out the signature descending phrase between the lines of the Doors’ rendition of “Whiskey Bar”) and send-ups of over-mannered baroque settings, with harpsichords and string quartets at the ready.

Van Dyke Parks spent far too much time in studios not to notice the musical possibilities in equipment used mostly to correct problems (the varispeed control on a tape recorder, or the possibilities untapped within a compressor or limiter, both designed to prevent signal

overload). This led him to want to create music built from the sounds usually avoided by recording engineers, like the spiraling decay of regenerated echo repeats. He had certainly participated in sessions that generated impressionistic music, the sounds that would evoke an altered state for a listener who was “experienced,” as Jimi Hendrix would put it. Brian Wilson’s arrangements for most of his songs from “California Girls” onward through the *SMiLE* project are perfect examples, though Curt Boettcher and Gary Usher captured much of the same lightning in a bottle, both as independent producers and working together on their Sagittarius project of the mid ’60s. By the time of Gary Usher’s production of *The Notorious Byrd Brothers*, released in the same year as *Song Cycle*, he too would be paying equal attention to arrangements and the legerdemain of signal processing.

* * *

Side One

“Vine Street”

At one point during Kees Colenbrander’s Dutch television documentary about Van Dyke Parks, Randy Newman sits at the piano, explaining the structure of “Vine Street,” the song that Van Dyke commissioned from him for the opening of *Song Cycle*. “I had a different beginning,” Newman explains. “It was equally as bad as the one he put on the front.” Newman hammers eighth-note chords, moaning, “Anita . . . Ah need yuh . . .”

Though *Song Cycle* does not begin with a Parks composition, one finds many of the devices germane to the

balance of Parks' enterprise are already in play. At the outset, a rush of tape hiss sucks the listener into a pell-mell rendition of "Black Jack Davy," a ballad that arrived in America sometime before 1750. Nick Tosches, in his book *Country: The Biggest Music in America*, devotes considerable space to the origins of the song, tracing it back to the roots of the Orpheus legend in ancient Greece. By Tosches' count, the ballad has turned up in every state since appearing in this country, changing titles and even central themes periodically, depending on where it's found. There is sex and violence at the heart of the song's lyrics, but even that primordial meaning has been denatured with time and travel. The phrase "black jack" takes on different connotations, depending on which English or Scottish dialect the song has migrated to: a cockroach, a black leather vest, a caterpillar, a dark sweetmeat made of treacle and spice. According to Nick Tosches, "Its significance in the ballad title is lost."

Since learning of the extended provenance of this song, I've come to appreciate this rambunctious number all the more. Steve Young, the rambling singer-songwriter pal of Parks from Gadsen, Alabama, sang this version for the album. It was recorded at a studio in Hollywood, then purposefully degraded in the mix, the better to simulate an older form of recorder used by the character that the singer portrays, his voice emerging alongside the string section with startling transparency once the tape excerpt has faded.

Van Dyke Parks: "Well I did this record when it became clear that I had the opportunity . . . I wanted to sequence [*Song Cycle*] with a hierarchy of things that were important

to me at the time. And Steve Young was a frustrated effort, I wanted to help him get a leg up. And that took a long time and for me to find out that I was going to be finally ineffective. But he didn't need a leg up after all. I think he did 14 albums for RCA. But he sang this song beautifully. He is part Indian, part Cherokee and has Scottish blood in him. The fact that he was the only man I had ever met who had to pick cotton and did so, that mattered to me, as well as to the piece."

After Steve Young's recording has faded, Van Dyke plays the part of the retired folk singer, surprising the listener by materializing only milliseconds after the end of "Black Jack Davy." He reminisces about the band whose tape we have just heard: "That was me / Third guitar / I wonder where the others are." By Parks' own admission "These were all Randy's ideas about me . . . he knew I was the third guitar [in the band with Stephen Stills and Steve Young]."

His voice is clear and presented without studio effects as he sings wistfully of an uncomplicated life lived on Vine Street. It is the only time on the record, save for the coda of quietude represented by "Pot Pourri" that we hear Parks' voice in its original timbre, without distortion or other forms of signal processing. The ingenuous charm of his singing is a perfect match for lyrics that speak to a small town mindset that may or may not have existed in the past, in a more bucolic Los Angeles that may only ever have existed in the singer's mind.

Leading into Parks' singing the song's title, a string figure chugs from back to foreground and then back again, a musical simulation of a Doppler effect; what Newman

referred to as a “Rossini crescendo” was requested by Parks, in tribute to the actual Doppler-accented pass-by of a locomotive that ends Brian Wilson’s *Pet Sounds* album.

With regard to the then unknown Randy Newman’s participation on the album, Parks allows, “I knew he was very bright. He had been hired to do some scoring on a television series called *Peyton Place*. I could see he was bored and I fed off of his competition with Lenny Waronker, which was residual of their adolescence together. That and [Randy’s father] Dr. Newman’s medicine cabinet became central to the propulsion of what became a very symbiotic triangulated regard; three people and all of us with different qualities. I came in, I think because Lenny Waronker wanted Randy to be troubled by somebody who was as gifted as I was on the piano. That’s all. I could play the piano real good.”

The piece modulates in an unusual way to a chord, nearly atonal, that sustains prior to being snapped off abruptly by the forte timpani that introduces “Palm Desert.” Though the piece that follows is a Parks original, Van Dyke attributes the ingenuity and musical compatibility of both parts of the transition to Randy Newman.

“*Palm Desert*”

With the seed money for his forthcoming album, Parks repaired to Palm Desert in the Coachella Valley, east of Los Angeles. There, ensconced with a spinet piano, he composed the majority of *Song Cycle*. With this song, Parks establishes the free associative wordplay central to his lyrics. The song also contains evidence of the

composer's abiding affection for the studio recordings of Juan García Esquivel. As best put by Francesco Adinolfi in his survey of '50s "space age" pop, *Mondo Exotica*, Mexican-born composer and pianist Esquivel was "A musician who made a decisive contribution to the development of stereo sound with a peculiar brand of 'space music.' His arrangements were immediately recognizable by their improvised dissonance, rhythmic changes, noises, echoes, pianos that crept feverishly into songs, and instruments like shaker gourds, Chinese bells, harpsichords and ondiolines [vacuum-tube-powered predecessors to contemporary synthesizers]." Panning individual instruments within a song, the movement of sounds back and forth from one speaker to another in stereo, was another tool in Esquivel's kit, as was the manipulation of tape speed to alter pitch and tone. Though these earlier records were ultimately lightweight fare, with Esquivel preferring to remake well-known songs for the surprise factor, it is neither difficult nor uncomplimentary to trace the lineage of high-fidelity craftsmanship and inventiveness from the "bachelor pad" vibe of Esquivel's 1958 *Other Worlds*, *Other Sounds* to the mix-intensive creations comprising *Song Cycle*.

Parks felt that part of Warners' interest in him as a potential solo artist for the label came out of his working with Brian Wilson, and their interest in, as he put it, "what it was that I learned by osmosis in Wilson's presence." Clearly, Parks was his own man as a composer and instrumentalist prior to the *SMiLE* collaboration, but one of Wilson's favorite devices, creating new timbres via laminates of different instruments playing unison

lines, can be heard in this arrangement and elsewhere throughout the album.

“Palm Desert” has always felt like an affectionate portrayal of Parks’ writing hideaway, closing as it does with a quote from a Buddy Holly song, repurposed as part of a new couplet: “Not fade away / I wish I could stay . . .” The song starts with tuneful percussion, pointing to the composer’s affectionate boyhood memories of attending concerts of Australian composer Percy Granger, paying tribute to Granger’s efforts to transform folk music into a chamber symphony.

Delving into the song’s layered allusions, Parks recalls, “The French horn at the beginning of ‘Palm Desert’ when it goes from the point of the first verse, it starts with a gelatinous thing that reminded me of JELL-O. J-E-L-L-O. [Parks is referring here to the old TV ad for JELL-O Gelatin, whose jingle’s ascending melody spelled the product’s name. Parks quotes the commercial’s melody beneath his line “I came west unto Hollywood.”] A chromatic dominant leading to a resolve. Very cartoon consciousness, pop art. I’m trying to be a pop artist, get the cliché within small referential magazine consciousness thinking. Everything is antidotal. I wanted to make an antidote, that is how I began the piece. My process was highly reactive throughout the album. I knew I needed to eat, I needed shelter and that’s about it really for somebody who’s been down to a can of mushroom gravy, no kidding. One can of mushroom gravy, my brother and I, that was all we had at times. So, to me, the whole idea, the concept of being a musician and suffering for it, this was my moment to give credit, which was why I should be

doing something. I wanted to do a good job and the way to do a good job to me was to find a process of discovery rather than prognostication. So I didn't know, but I knew I didn't know. One thing I didn't know was that [horn player] Vince DeRosa could hit a high F on take one. And what he did on the beginning, that's a French horn trio, there's a trio of saxophones also and there is a trio of the steel guitars played by Red Rhodes also on 'Palm Desert.' You notice there are three saxophones but on top of the saxophones there's a harmonica."

The American composer John Adams, in his notes for the "Sentimentals" portion of his 1973 work "American Standard," points up "The gentle swing of the trap set . . . its presence gives the sound a distinctly Californian feel, close to that of the Beach Boys, or Hollywood studio bands." Adams' description is far more evocative than the actual performance of the piece, which marked his recording debut on Brian Eno's Obscure label. The quality to which Adams alludes, however, is manifest in its most perfect form by the rhythm section on "Palm Desert."

Also featuring in this piece is cellist Jesse Erlich, who played the triplet figures — first suggested by Van Dyke — that animate the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations." The transitions from verse to chorus are neatly bridged by the overdubbed steel guitar figures played by O. J. "Red" Rhodes, who would later gain prominence via his appearances on a string of Michael Nesmith albums in the '70s. The fluid pitch-bending figures played by Rhodes that spill across the end of one stanza and onto the start of the next recall the similar use of slide guitar as interstitial material in the "space age" pop of Esquivel.

It is with “Palm Desert” that mix engineer Bruce Botnick earns his sleeve credit for “stereo composition,” distinct from the pro forma title of “mixing engineer.” Most of the instruments are placed at either side of the stereo panorama, leaving the space between the speakers as a stage for percussion elements such as the wooden ratchet that one hears in the song’s final moments roaming from right to left and back again. Infinitesimally brief delay times help separate the different vocal parts sung by Parks, also split between the speakers. The painstaking and ultimately musical care given to the deployment of different instruments and voices is interesting given, at this point in history and in the words of Botnick’s brother Doug, “Stereo just wasn’t that big a deal as yet.” On average, far more care was extended to mono mixes, as those buyers held the greater market share. The sense of physical space — the sound stage — conjured by Botnick via the care lavished on his stereo mixes throughout *Song Cycle*’s duration, was clue enough that the future was just around the corner.

Having said that, the obviously simulated bird calls that flit between the speakers at the song’s coda nowadays put me in mind of the mechanical robin at the close of David Lynch’s film *Blue Velvet*. Which is a little unsettling.

“Widow’s Walk”

The song encapsulates Parks’ efforts to console his mother’s sister, her husband having recently died of cancer at the time of recording.

“The harp is the only thing to handle the down beat,” notes Parks. “That’s a harp. And there here comes a

bass marimba that I play. [Rhythmically] There's three against two with the mandolin, straight eighths. Then a minimally invasive accordion continuo appears; it goes between a shuffle and straight eighths, that's what I like about this. I like the fantasy of 'Widow's Walk' which was just to encourage my aunt that I was making some cartoon music for her. This was all created during very under populated sessions, only one or two players adding their parts by very careful stages, with a lot of it [recorded at] Armin Steiner's studio in Hollywood."

Of the vocal processing on this track, Parks commented, "Lenny Waronker did me a terrible disservice here, to make me sound like a chipmunk. Which was really his father's strong suit [Note: this is Parks' punning reference to the fact of Si Waronker's Liberty Records being saved by Ross Bagdasarian, Sr. and the latter's "Alvin and the Chipmunks" records. The chipmunks were named after Liberty executives, which is how Simon became a middle brother in Alvin's family.] In fact I did sound like a chipmunk. That is my voice."

A motif of this album, one shared with other recordings of the period, is the use of recirculating tape echo; the final syllable of a word or in the case of this song, the staccato phrasing of the balalaikas, shimmers outward in extended fashion. The big difference between the rote implementation of this effect on most 'head' recordings of the day and its appearance on a track like "Widow's Walk" is the rhythmic exactness of the echo, timed here to subdivide the song's beats, creating compound rhythms. Parks and his mix engineer Bruce Botnick were not alone in their attention to the musical possibilities of carefully

spaced echo repeats. This motif was central to the minimalist composer Terry Riley's keyboard improvisations during the '60s and '70s; in the same period Jamaican producer Lee Perry explored the rhythms within echoes.

“Laurel Canyon Blvd.”

Though Parks lived in Laurel Canyon during the period following *Song Cycle*'s release, well before its recording he was certainly aware of the significance of this neighborhood, running north from Sunset into the Hollywood Hills. Laurel Canyon's status as the epicenter of bohemian chic and a rustic getaway within Los Angeles' city limits is the stuff of legend. Van Dyke and his first wife Durrie Parks would move to the area in the wake of *Song Cycle*'s completion, where Three Dog Night's Danny Hutton and sundry other high divers of the low life already resided. Harvey Kubernik's *Canyon of Dreams* chronicles in interviews and photographs several decades worth of “What's up, Laurel Canyon.”

Of his ode to the canyon and its social scene, Parks remembers, “There was a balalaika orchestra on this track that went on for five minutes of recording. I was in love with this Russian violinist, Misha Goodatieff. He had eaten grass on his way across the Russian steppes to get finally to Shanghai and then to Los Angeles. He had starved and now he was playing violin at a Russian restaurant called The Balalaika on Melrose. My mother came to town and I took her to hear him play; I remember he practically stabbed her in the eye with his bow.

“All of the events, as I've gone through my recording experience, most of them have to do with offering

reverence to musicians that I know and admire. Kind of borders on some social need the presence, you know, the proportionality of any particular ally in what is called my work. That's this guy. I think Misha brought his cousins; they all were balalaika players. There was a bass balalaika in there; that's rarely heard in the United States. Notes had to be written for it and you had to find [players] who could read. So we did that, we had five balalaikas, including the very large bass version, and I wrote their notes. The point was, they needed the employment and I was there to help."

"The All Golden"

This track may be the best known — or at least most readily summoned in those rare conversations between humans with shared knowledge and love of this album. The spooky, subaqueous atmosphere of the introduction was achieved through an ingenious modification to the tape recorder providing echo at Sunset Sound. The result of what might best be thought of as recording technician origami, "the Farkle" was concocted by mix engineer Bruce Botnick; by his own description, "It was totally a function of creativity at the moment when you need to do something. And that was a good thing." He will admit that the origins of the name are lost to the passage of time.

By way of further extolling the versatility of his little invention, Botnick adds, "We did use it a lot, used it on the violin and harp. I took splicing tape I think or masking tape — very thin — and would fold it so like it was a fan, lots of blades sticking out, and wrap it around and tape it

to the capstan of the tape machine [a component of the pinch roller that pulls recording tape through a recorder at precise speeds] so as it was going around it had these fins all the way around it and what it would do is cause the capstan to bounce." The contact of tape against record head would become rhythmically intermittent, producing a sound evocative of, by turns, high tension wires and scrambled radio waves that became a recurring motif of *Song Cycle*.

Bruce Botnick allowed that the Farkle had its day in the sun during *Song Cycle's* mix, though his brother Doug used it on subsequent sessions with other artists. Makeshift modifications of this sort were common among many of the recording technicians who advanced their craft. The "wobbled" piano sound of the solo played by producer George Martin during the Beatles' song "Lovely Rita" (from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*) was achieved by nearly identical means, with "sticky tape" applied to a tape capstan. Larry Levine, who engineered producer Phil Spector's "girl group" recordings of the early '60s, would adjust the pitch of a singer's voice by wrapping different thicknesses of tape around the capstan when recording a vocalist, then removing the tape during playback, at which point the vocal would change pitch.

The processed arpeggios, an impressionistic series of dominant 7/9 chords which introduce "The All Golden," were performed by Gayle Levant. Her harp was endowed with surreal vibrato, courtesy of the Farkle. The song is a portrait of Parks' friend Steve Young, whose vocals open the album. Parks allows that "The All Golden" was written without Young's sanction. "I don't know if he'll ever

forgive me for doing it, but this is my attempt, a cartoon consciousness attempt at trying to figure out, not only his dilemma of course, but my own. [In a musical pun, Parks employs the pentatonic scale near the mention of Young's "small apartment atop an Oriental food store."] It's very easy to swallow, that's why I mentioned his hunger. This is the one where [brass player] Vince DeRosa stands out. When the brass falls apart in the middle of the piece, and it does fall apart, I just left it right there.

"*The All Golden* was a place that Will Carleton had written about in his famous book *Farm Ballads*. I found that book in my mother's possessions, so I called my publishing company Found Farm Ballads. The work is not good that Will Carleton did. He was not a very good poet, but some very good titles came out of that: *Barefoot Boy* and so forth. *Clang of the Yankee Reaper* [the title of Parks' third Warners LP], which was given to the Earl of Pennbrooke by Will Carleton. Now what happened? [Carleton] was selling American International Harvester to a British Lord and he was thinking about this behind what he said was 'the heat of the team.' He was there, in other words, right when they were turning from the agrarian age to the age of industry and that to me was a precious prism to use for this piece. That's what I did. I thought that was very important. I thought that was an important thing to do, to say that I saw that. So that's what I did. I used Steve Young as my narrator to get me through this, so somebody might give a shit about somebody who was living in Silver Lake without any money. So I wanted to tell about something that I knew. I didn't think that this was any less brutal than [skid-row poet Charles]

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Bukowski, I thought it was brutal but necessary. I wanted to make it and coat it as well as I could with something, some kind of companionable musical sounds that would bring the listener in, for nothing other than a study in the ordinary human condition, something like hunger.

“I love the three French horns; here I have a trombone and a bass trombone [heard amidst the phrase: “Off the record/He is hungry . . .”] with [the brass section simulating] the automobile horn, something that came from my love for Spike Jones — so very important to me, his ‘Cocktails For Two!’ Spike Jones, pure ear candy, new vistas, new aural realities, all *very* important to me. [That phrase] was, to me, a very good, comedic non sequitur — a non sequitur to somehow equalize the idea of hunger and how much I knew about it at the time. Which was considerable enough.”

“Here is that train again, another trip to Los Angeles,” Parks reveals, on hearing the distant whistle that sits so comfortably alongside a chromatic harmonica’s descending sigh. “Three saxophones acting like a southern zephyr. Southwest winds. [Parks sings:] ‘Them country boys don’t cotton much . . .’ Straight eighth [notes during] ‘One, two, three four . . .’ Then a big moment for the balalaikas.”

The track includes a brief but incandescent viola solo by Virginia Majewsky, who was the principle violist for the 20th Century Fox studio orchestra; this passage segues straightaway into a comparably impressive horn solo from Vince DeRosas. As the track fades, Gayle Levant reprises a series of repetitive harp motifs (the composer’s show of affection for the music of French impressionist

composer Erik Satie), all of it using that magic modifier, the Farkle, in overdrive. The music fades to black. A train pulls into the station, its grinding metal and blast of steam evocative of American expansionism. Before the fade concludes, we hear a man on the station platform, asking “Ja get it? Alright.” He may as well be addressing the listener, for all intents and purposes. Side One hasn’t finished and, already, there has been much to take in.

“Van Dyke Parks”

The track fades in with a convincing audio collage: flares fired over oily dark seas, distant explosions, blasts from a steamship’s whistle pitched low like the cry of a dying animal. A lone male voice is heard (James Hendricks, ex-husband of “Mama” Cass Elliot and co-founder with her of the folk group, The Mugwumps) singing “Nearer My God To Thee.” The scene is now completely set, as, of course, this is the song that legend has the band on the *Titanic* playing as the damaged ship went down. A chorus of voices, startling in their entrance and singing in another key, takes up “Nearer My God To Thee,” as the big boat groans to its conclusion. As the curtain falls on Side One, the singer and his guitar return faintly. There are distant reports from flares, and then the ship’s horn drones, signing off.

By restating the melody in another key, composer Parks sought to depict, across the water, this disengagement from the survivors of a sinking ship. “That’s what I did when I called it ‘Van Dyke Parks,’” he quips, “Man overboard! I was so impressed with the *Titanic* and studying the potted plants as we go down. That was to me

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what it was all about at that time with Vietnam, the racial divide of America, politics, the war on ‘stupid’ — which is not over yet and I don’t think we will see the end of it. The record was meant to illuminate these topics with this somewhat political commentary. I felt that a political consciousness was absolutely essential to anything that had any lyrical content. So that’s what that was all about. And the *Titanic* I thought was a pictorial opportunity.

“I thought that would be a fun way to confess the end of the first half of the album,” Parks concludes, referencing *Song Cycle*’s original release as a two-sided vinyl LP. “In those days recordings were bifurcated and this one was certainly. I don’t think too many people lasted into the second act. A lot of people could rush forward to grab a front row seat.”

Side Two

“Public Domain”

Alternating between the folksy, rolling gait of its first movement and a dramatic passage then enacted by the string section, “Public Domain” found Parks combining autobiographical material with what he describes as a “basic indictment against the patrician class, and the arrogance of industry.”

The piece commences with a spirited harp figure, drawn from Parks’ knowledge of the tradition of harp playing in Mexico’s Veracruz state, having traveled there with his brother Carson to acquire the local variation of the stringed instrument. Introduced to the region in

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Producer Lenny Waronker and arranger Van Dyke Parks scrutinize charts during a Harpers Bizarre session.



In the control room during a recording session for the group Harpers Bizarre, with (from left) engineer Lee Herschberg, producer Lenny Waronker, arranger Van Dyke Parks, lead singer (and future Warner Bros. record producer) Ted Templeman, Harpers' manager Carl Scott and music publisher Larry Marks.

the sixteenth century by Spanish explorers, the diatonic Veracruz harp in its vernacular form has a five-octave scale, with no pedals, though its shape approximates that of a classical harp. Parks wrote to infuse the exuberance of this tradition within his own music; impressively, the concert-trained harpist Gayle Levant understood and communicated the regional feel that the composer was hoping to establish here. A second overdub of the harp, closer in the soundstage established by the mix, establishes a rolling, bluegrass-like rhythm.

As Parks wraps his singing around some tricky alliteration, the listener's attention is drawn once more to the unusual treatment of his vocals. Often during the album, Bruce Botnick would feed Van Dyke's voice into the rotating speaker mechanism contained in the Leslie cabinet usually found attached to a Hammond organ. The horns within the cabinet can be spun at varying speeds, imparting a mechanical vibrato, often of exaggerated depth and periodicity so as to yield truly otherworldly effects.

As regards the processing of his voice, Parks opines that “[Producer Lenny Waronker and I] had no fear of artifice. It was the right thing to do. That was all that I thought about. Lenny encouraged me. He was a willing accomplice, though he remarked years later to me that ‘You got the criticism.’ Really, I didn’t think too much about the vocalist, it didn’t matter to me.”

“Donovan’s Colours”

As previously noted, this was the initial song recorded and given a test release, prior to Warner Bros. authorizing the production of *Song Cycle* as a full-length album.

Van Dyke Parks recorded his take on this well-liked song by Donovan in response to seeing the Scottish troubadour treated miserably by Bob Dylan in the D. A. Pennebaker documentary *Dont Look Back*. Parks' principal motive in covering the song was to express support for Donovan.

"[“Donovan’s Colours”] had multiple pianos,” producer Waronker enthuses. “Van Dyke’s piano playing was so great. I felt the more the better, without having much experience. Acoustic piano, electric piano, tack . . . This was months before *Song Cycle* began.”

In recalling the genesis of his first album with this piece, Parks spoke of having “Stepped from one kind of music into something else.” Additionally, he deems this the most successful track on the record, though this judgment could reflect his ambivalence about a solo career, still lingering decades later.

The mathematics of the first 20 seconds of the piece are critical to both the unspoken scenario created by Parks and the rhythmic base upon which “Donovan’s Colours” is built. The composer drops a coin into a machine, which in turn starts a pneumatic motor; spilling out of this comes a rhythmic tattoo for piano and castanets. These few moments, which swoop past with such alacrity, contain the cleverness of a Rube Goldberg machine, the over-engineered chain reaction devices drawn by that cartoonist in the ’30s. There is much about *Song Cycle*, with this piece in particular, that put me in mind of Goldberg’s wonderfully imagined, ever so intricately connected components and events. A critic once disparaged Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Amélie*, a film also infused with the antic spirit of

Goldberg's mechanical imaginings, asking in his review, "where does one find the heart in what appears as nothing more than a box of tricks?" One can't help but feel sorry for that writer, as one might for those listening to *Song Cycle*, and especially to "Donovan's Colours," who only hear cleverness and not warmth.

Van Dyke Parks: "What you hear at the beginning was a *musée mechanique*, a machine owned by Lenny Marvin, a fellow who supplied instruments to [avant-garde composer and instrument builder] Harry Partch. I took a Nagra [the remote reel-to-reel recorder used by film crews] to record the machine, which then we transferred to four-track in order to make it the governing force of this piece. You can count from the downbeat when the coin hits the bottom, 4 beats on the bar until the organ comes in; there's a high degree of regularity throughout.

"I wanted to make homage to the electro-mechanical era, a golden era that was obliterated by recorded sound. I was deeply impressed when, in 1953, I heard 'Barrelhouse Organ,' an EP recorded by Emory Cook [whose many Trinidadian recordings were issued on the Cook label] in Amsterdam. I was going for something like the sound of that mechanical device."

Once again, it is readily evident that the timing of echo delay of each instrument has been given careful consideration. The percussion kit is plainspoken in the manner of a Salvation Army band on a street corner, with piccolo snare and occasional kick drum. Parks himself recorded the marimba parts at half speed, the part transposed down an octave in the act of playing, then raised an octave when the tape was played back at standard speed. Laughing, he adds,

“If I wasn’t a fucking genius before I started this project, I became one overnight when I discovered the [possibilities of enhanced performance afforded by the] tape machine. That was like love in the back of the Chevy!”

The piece accelerates in a seemingly random manner with the entry of a clarinet, then it takes on a Latinate tinge. What follows is the musical transition which Parks describes wonderfully as “Vincent Price coming out of the wine cellar,” in the moment when organ and tack piano seem to collide and explode. The listener then experiences a “moment of decompression,” as Parks deems it, a metronomic device; the piano plays an ostinato, followed by harpsichord, tack piano and electric Rhodes piano. Lenny Waronker admits to having been so impressed with Parks’ pianistic skill; the producer easily justified what others might have felt was keyboard overkill: “I felt the more the better, without having much experience [in the studio].”

It is at this point in the song that, on the monophonic edition of *Song Cycle*, a sliver of Parks’ own voice creeps through the welter of keyboards, singing “Blue is the color of the sky.” For those used to the instrumental continuity of the stereo version, these few melodic syllables are most surprising. The effect resembles the random, phantasmal entry of vocals on a Jamaican dub album, which of course *Song Cycle* predated by several years. The motive behind this disparity, whether it was Parks or mixer Botnick who allowed this voice to materialize briefly, as though visiting from another plane (or a different record), has been lost to time.

The arrangement allows for the right amount of

harnessed cacophony, a building of tension that is released with impressive timing, in a restatement of the opening theme. Again, we hear the rhythm known to Calypsonians as “Whip de lion,” as first taught to Parks by Andrew de la Bastide, whose steel band featured on the same bill at folk club dates in Hermosa Beach with Carson and Van Dyke’s act, the Steeltown Two.

The piece ends with more Satie-esque figures, this time from guitar and accordion; with an abrupt reversal of tape, the mechanism comes to a stop, the coin initially dropped returning to the machine’s user.

Parks’ cover of Donovan’s song (which the Scottish minstrel enjoyed, incidentally) is a breathtaking ride, even situated as it is amidst several other marvels. Weighing practical considerations of live performance against the complexity of his creation, Parks confesses, “I had no expectations as to how I’d duplicate this or make a living, and so I didn’t.”

“The Attic”

A setting for eight cellos, playing on beat or exactly off the beat depending on which side of the stereo image the listener opts to focus, frames this meditation on an experience recalled from the composer’s boyhood. Elsewhere, a snare drum plays to accent specifically the moods of discovery and reflection discussed in the lyrics.

This is the track on *Song Cycle* that most resembles a production from the golden age of radio, a feeling underscored by Gayle Levant’s sweeping harp glissandi; one half expects to hear a commercial for Ovaltine following its conclusion. Bruce Botnick once again integrates

sound effects harvested from the Sunset Sound library at Van Dyke's instigation: trunk lids creak as they open, insects drone and birds sing, the inhabitants of "the forest primeval."

Parks explains, "This is about finding my father's World War II trunk. I was upstairs in the attic, my brothers and I went into my father's war trunk, I would go up there and read his war letters to his wife." Parks' father, by the time he wrote the notes discovered by his son in "The Attic," was traveling alongside the Allied offensive in Europe, as the chief examining psychiatric officer at the liberation of Dachau. Asked as to the tenor of the letters, Parks admits to having forgotten their actual contents. "It's just they were deep, so deep and traumatic. It was as torrid as anything that I had dreamed about, what he had lived through . . ."

"Laurel Canyon Blvd."

A reprise of Parks' earlier ode to Los Angeles' bohemian grove, this version is split into two distinct movements, the second of these featuring a vocal so heavily processed (again, one suspects the influence of the Farkle) that it seems to beam into the song in the manner of a shortwave numbers station, tremulous with alien energy. A string band arrangement buoys Parks' account of commuters rubbing up against demimonde types on the make in the Canyon.

Misha Goodatieff's florid violin stylings add an impish edge to the track. When *Song Cycle* was complete, Van Dyke brought a copy of his new album to the expatriate Russian, only to find out that Misha had nothing on

which to play it. So it was that later, when an interviewer asked, at Parks' home, to hear the record, its creator was unable to oblige the request. He'd already given Misha his own stereo.

“By The People”

The most ostensibly political statement on the record, the narrative arc of “By The People” leaps in and out of the present tense by any number of devices: female accompanying singers who have recreated the sound of those wartime darlings, the Andrews Sisters; gaps of protracted length between movements within the song, bridged by deteriorating tape echo spilling endlessly forward, or by a violin solo disconnected from its surroundings, wandering the vastness of a stereo soundscape; and the nature of the song’s lyrics itself, making oblique connections between the Deep South and Russia in the time of the czar.

The song begins with a quivering hand, in the form of an arpeggio played on violin by Misha Goodatieff. By Parks’ own description, “What you hear initially is a very, very shaky intro from a very nervous man about to plunge us into the cold war. My favorite film score at that time was *Dr. Zhivago*. It reflected the organization of vernacular [motives] in music, where a composer would offer some notation to indicate a space of time for the players’ parts, but you don’t write all of their notes, they just play.”

“In this event, I did write for the balalaikas, I wrote out their notes and they played them. It was very primitive. You couldn’t say they were in tune, more than they

embodied that quality that the Brazilians call *desafinado*, describing how music can be painfully out of tune but somehow beautiful — in this case, because of the [balalaika's] doubled strings. There are innate problems of intonation with instruments of that sort, but that didn't bother me. I knew their parts would work."

What was less obvious was where to put these working parts. The density of Parks' arrangement tested the capacity of the multi-track formats of that era to contain the sheer number of players and discrete arrangements. Lee Herschberg, the album's recording engineer, recalls the search for blank stretches within individual tape tracks on which to "punch in" the recordings of the Russian players. Adding these parts comparatively late in the game was accomplished with some attendant risk: to "punch out" of a recording too late was to risk erasing previously recorded parts of different instruments contained on the same tracks. Still, between the surgical precision of Herschberg's working methods and the innate musicality of the Russian players, their parts were inserted without harm to existing performances. Later, it would require additional dexterity on the part of engineer Bruce Botnick during the song's mix to trace the path of the Russians' playing on the song's multi-track tape: a few bars' worth on this track, then more over on another, and so forth.

"By The People" reflects Parks' interest, first sparked during his youth in New York, in the presence of white Russians in the United States. "This really fascinated me. I sought it out. This song is really about the Cold War, written as it was in close proximity to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Our climate was still very much filled with intrigue

and built for movies like James Bond to ride in popularity. This was a real fear. The mysterious circumstances surrounding my brother Ben's death also informed the piece.

"People recoil from the culture of a sworn enemy, that's what was happening."

"Russia was not something to study, and when we did we found that it was inescapably kitsch and the number, of course, is high kitsch. I thought about Caucasus and Georgia, and those became a springboard for puns, more lyrics born of a free relationship in meaning."

"Pot Pourri"

The final track from *Song Cycle* gave Warner Bros. president Joe Smith further pause for concern when first auditioning its contents. The track was very quiet, as though operating at some distance from the theater in which the balance of the album had been performed. It was quiet, true, but by design. As recalled by engineer Doug Botnick, "Pot Pourri" was recorded in one take onto two tracks of an eight-track master tape at Sunset Sound, in all likelihood the final piece to be tracked for the album prior to mixing.

Its lyrics, while concise, come closest to those qualities admired by Parks in the verse of Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. (Parks has quoted stanzas from Ferlinghetti's "Coney Island of the Mind" in concert.) The track is a meditation prompted by a Japanese gardener whom Parks watched from a window at his house on Fremont Place, the former tending a wisteria vine, the "purple arbor" mentioned in the song. In stark contrast is the near-homonym burned into history's pages, Pearl Harbor;

how, wonders the singer, to reconcile the beautiful Nisei culture that produced gardeners such as these, with everything he has read about the Japanese disregard for the Geneva Convention in World War II?

“As a war baby, Pearl Harbor had the effect of being a real jump start in my own life and understanding of the world,” Parks avows. “I thought about [the song’s] relative volume in contrast to the rest of the album. It was my feeling that [the singer] should be looking out a window, not right in the room, but on the edge of the room making this observation. I wanted to comment on the beautiful Nisei culture that took over landscaping until, one by one, the masters of the art died.

“It was good to do it, to keep it that casual and quiet, an observation that was ultimately so dark, to try to find out about the horrors of war and what people will do to one another.”

Doug Botnick, the assistant engineer throughout the sessions for *Song Cycle*, is also an accomplished baritone opera singer. He points out that many song cycles end quietly, distinct from a symphony ending on a triumphant note. Botnick observes that ending quietly and poignantly, or just simply, is an equally workable strategy, frequently employed in the classical canon. And so with “Pot Pourri,” his assessment is much the same. “It’s basically a simple ending to a complicated, more sophisticated piece.”

Bruce Botnick on *Song Cycle* and Van Dyke Parks

. . . we became the place on the planet to record. It was really a wonderful time, because, at the same time I was doing the Doors, I was doing Brasil '66, I was doing the Turtles, Love, Van Dyke Parks — Song Cycle — that was a great album. I loved doing that one.

—Bruce Botnick, producer/engineer,
recalling the late '60s at Sunset Sound
recording studio, *Temples of Sound*

Sunset Sound was the legendary Hollywood studio where landmark recordings by the Doors, Herb Alpert, Randy Newman, Love, the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, Prince and so many others were tracked. The engineer for most of the above sessions, Bruce Botnick, was the recording magus-in-residence at Sunset for a great many years. The studio's founder, Tutti Camarata, interviewed in *Temples of Sound*, was asked how much of his facility's success during the '60s could be attributed to Botnick's abilities. Camarata replied, "All of it."

Song Cycle was recorded at several studios, but the Herculean task of mixing the record — the “stereo & monaural compositions” referred to in the album’s credits — was accomplished at Sunset Sound by Bruce Botnick. The engineer who helmed so many of the rock and pop music sessions that shaped culture during the past half-century now concentrates primarily on film soundtracks and reissue projects. Speaking at his own studio in the hill country of Ojai, California, Botnick revisited memories of the record he still refers to as “a psychedelic masterpiece,” and its creator.

“[*Song Cycle*] was recorded on eight-track. We’ve been talking about trying to remix it for surround and we went into the tapes, transferred them to [digital recording software] Pro Tools for listening. It’s really obvious that it was very checker board-y, in terms of where things were located [on the multi-track master tape]. You’d find the violin, then the vocal and then it would be guitar or drum, all in the same track, though not at the same time. Then multiply that times eight! I don’t know how the heck I mixed it, to be very honest with you. I must either have been really stoned or just kind of plugged into what was coming because it didn’t faze me, obviously.

“[Original supervising engineer] Lee Herschberg’s recording technique kept everything very succinct and well organized on tape. The fact was, in those days we always recorded with echo and reverb, everything was printed we never left that ’til the mix as you would now. And there’s a lot of value to doing that because when you hear it, when you print it, it’s there. You can go back and try to recreate it later on, and 9 times out of 10, you can’t

do it. You're playing 'Beat the demo.' I can't tell you the amount of quick mixes I've done at the end of a session that have wound up being the definitive mix, because we could never get there again. Not that the reverb wasn't the same, or the effects or the equalization, its just the person, it's the performance.

"I mixed *Song Cycle* both in Studio One and in Studio Two at Sunset Sound but used the echo chamber from Studio One which was the famous echo chamber. I think it's 'The All Golden' that has a train at the end. I always loved to put sound effects on things and I went to the Elektra sound effects library and pulled off the train and all kinds of things; same thing with 'Van Dyke Parks' [Botnick hums "Nearer My God To Thee," which plays as the ship is going down at the end of Side One] with the *Titanic* and the waves and the horn, we did all that.

"I remember [Elektra Records' founder and president] Jac Holzman was hanging around a lot at Studio Two and [Warner Bros. Records president] Joe Smith was there and he was listening to *Song Cycle*, and not exactly sure what he was going to do with it. He was not exactly very positive. Lenny of course was really excited and realized the depth of what was there, that we had made this psychedelic masterpiece. So Jac's listening and he says 'I'll put it out. How much you want? I'll write you a check right now.' Lenny just looked over and Van Dyke went 'Oh!', not knowing the depth of what was going to happen. Jac was very insistent. He wanted it. He understood what it was. Joe heard that and he said 'We're putting this out.'

"It's funny the way things happen, when you come to a fork in the road. Had *Song Cycle* come out on Elektra,

RICHARD HENDERSON

Jac would have done a whole different thing with it. It probably would have been better on Elektra only from the standpoint that they were dealing with all kinds of stuff. It was a very eclectic label and Warner Reprise wasn't that animal. But had it come out on Elektra, Van Dyke might have not had the same opportunities that were handed to him in production, and in an executive capacity with the audio/visual department for music videos. So things happen for a reason . . .

"If you're going to start out to make a psychedelic record from the ground up, it's not going to be any good. Whereas Van Dyke in his infinite wisdom made one, and it's one of the classics."

Enveloped

As noted previously, technology turned a corner in the period of *Song Cycle's* recording and release. Throughout Hollywood's studios, four-track recorders were replaced by eight-track machines, and a host of sonic innovations materialized in tandem with this upgrading of technology. Record companies were obliged also to rethink their marketing strategies during this time, especially Warner Bros. It took several years, actually more than the first half of the '60s, to retool Warners' artists and repertoire priorities to re-evaluate and accommodate a burgeoning youth market as more than a market for novelty items. Warners had done well with comedy albums and product tied-in to hit TV shows (Edd "Kookie" Byrnes, resident hipster of Warners' hit TV drama, *77 Sunset Strip*, was press ganged into a vehicle for hit singles and albums), and of course folk-rock, as manifested by a string of successful releases from Peter, Paul and Mary, proved vastly profitable for the Burbank label.

When it came to achieving credibility with the

counterculture, however, Warners was slow on the draw. Previously they had reserved their own niche during the British Invasion by signing the Kinks. A couple of years later, in time for the Monterey Pop Festival, Warners had added Jimi Hendrix and the Grateful Dead. The company capitalized on the George Harrison-inspired vogue for spirituality and all things Indian with a somewhat esoteric strategy, issuing *Om: The Sound Of Hinduism*, a spoken word recording by Alan Watts, the English student of Eastern religions. But Liberace was still on the label and Warners' product went to market conservatively dressed, if not looking outright tacky.

This changed when Ed Thrasher joined the label in 1964 and began to assert his design sensibility. It didn't happen all at once, but in time Thrasher came to define "the West Coast style of big-idea art direction," as fellow sleeve designer Paula Scher was quoted in Thrasher's *New York Times* obituary, following his death in 2006. The new visual language, beloved of drug takers and youthquakers alike, was digested and refined by Thatcher and his staff in the Warners art department. He also exercised laudable taste in the renegade freelance photographers, typographers and graphics artists now being hired by the label. As the counterculture became a force to be reckoned with in the marketplace, sounds aimed squarely at the shaggier, spacier stripe of music buyer — Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* or Hendrix's *Are You Experienced* or the Grateful Dead's *Anthem Of The Sun* — came wrapped in graphics that spoke to contemplative states or fearless storming of the antipodes of consciousness or yearnings for sylvan bliss, the artwork sometimes addressing all of these

impulses at once. And though Thatcher was reported to have rolled his eyes ceiling-ward when told that a new signing to the label, the folk singer Joni Mitchell, would be painting her own album covers, he adapted quickly and became skilled at collaborating with musicians whose own painting or drawing was intrinsic to their artistic impulses.

Song Cycle was an early entry in the visual makeover of Warners' releases. As mentioned earlier, my first impression of the sleeve art was that it bore marked similarity to a poetry collection — nothing very lysergic about that. Could I have been far wrong in thinking that the company had opted for a Trojan horse strategy to sell challenging music? Here was a vinyl disc encoded with more riddles than you'd find in a valley full of Sphinxes, housed in a sleeve that seemed more appropriate to the collected verse of Emily, the Belle of Amherst.

Over time, as I learned more about Van Dyke Parks and his proprietary array of cultural inputs, I found *Song Cycle's* graphic presentation more deeply appropriate with each passing year. The more chauvinistic members of hippie audiences during the mid and late '60s liked to think that they had erased earlier, inferior culture. Not for them the music beloved of bikers and other greasy denizens of the previous decade. (Techno enthusiasts revived this hidebound, "everything begins anew with us" stance in the late '80s and early '90s; it was no less irritating then.) Parks, by contrast, loved the music of centuries past; a cursory assessment of his record's title was proof in itself of his affection for the culture that produced Schubert. Parks had played in coffeehouses with brother Carson, and had recited stanzas by Lawrence

Ferlinghetti and Robert Frost in concert. Presenting him as a well-manicured Beat was not a visual misstep, but rather a clue to his motivations.

Song Cycle's packaging has always seemed too simple: a photographic portrait of a young man seated in a chair, bordered to the left with a boldly proportioned white panel containing symmetrically arrayed type, displaying the album's title and author in both directions. The obverse side of the sleeve positions a close-up of the artist in high contrast black and white, his expression affable but guarded, as credits for a horde of musicians, technicians and executives swarm like ants next to the purpose-built inscrutability of liner notes by Paul Jay Robbins.

The graphics team responsible for the look of *Song Cycle* was assembled with care and discerning taste equivalent to the selection of the crack session musicians who performed Parks' compositions. The album design was credited to The Corporate Head, a loosely defined agglomeration of visual artists, friends and dope dealers. "Most of these people we just identified as being part of The Corporate Head," recalled photographer Guy Webster, "But they didn't do anything. The name was a play on words, indicating either contemporary parlance for the brain, or the nautical slang for a ship's washroom. Our business card contained the line, 'We're waiting for the toilet.'" Mostly the hippie-era graphics firm represented the potent collaboration between Webster and the designer Tom Wilkes. *Song Cycle* was an important early credit on both artists' curriculum vitae. Wilkes, for his part, went on to design some 300 pop and jazz album covers, nearly every one of these a signpost for the era

of its release. (Regrettably, Tom Wilkes passed away in 2009, prior to being interviewed for this book.) For his part, Guy Webster was established early as a world-class photographer of rock musicians and actors, his portraits emblazoned across album covers and movie posters alike through the decades following *Song Cycle's* appearance.

Webster's photograph was taken at the home Parks occupied with his then-wife Durrie, in the exclusive Fremont Place compound adjacent to Wilshire Boulevard on Hollywood's southern perimeter. Durrie's grandfather owned Monolith Portland Cement, the company responsible for, among other things, paving the Pasadena freeway; as such, the family could afford a couple of plum addresses within this early gated community. (Parks recalls, with fondness, that police could only enter Fremont Place "in hot pursuit," making it an ideal haven for possession of *Cannabis sativa* during a less tolerant era.) It was in this upscale enclave, albeit in a carriage house apartment, that Van Dyke lived during the recording of *Song Cycle*. By his own account, "The place was vast. I changed light bulbs for two years before moving to Laurel Canyon."

Parks impressed Guy Webster upon their first meeting. "I sensed classicism in Van Dyke. Clearly he was more intellectual than plain old rock 'n' roll, so I wanted to play this up, his being dressed like an East Coast intellectual, the tweed jacket and all of that." With a restrained style very much the order of the day, to his credit Webster went the extra mile, shooting Parks with a long exposure, utilizing a large format camera. "That's why I had him rest his head on his hand in the photo, to minimize any

blurring from movement.” Webster shot explicitly with renaissance quality in mind. His photo session yielded a dye-transfer print, being the end result of a continuous tone printing process possessing a larger color gamut and tonal scale than any other form of photo printing. (Unfortunately much of the subtlety in Webster’s photo was lost in the assembly line quality of offset reproductions used in record sleeve manufacture.)

“Nobody ever gave me directions in those days,” as Guy Webster remembered, “I was allowed to do what I wanted throughout some 300 album covers.” Said covers included acts as disparate as The Mamas & The Papas, the Rolling Stones, Claudine Longet, the Baja Marimba Band and, a personal favorite, Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band memorably preserved in their “25th Century Quaker” costumes on the gatefold photo of the band’s second album, *Strictly Personal*. Webster wanted his photograph of a seated Parks to run full bleed on *Song Cycle*’s front cover but, by his recollection, “Somebody at Warner Brothers talked us into doing graphics on the side [of the photo].”

Warner’s worries about underselling *Song Cycle* enabled, by contrast, a final note of classical influence as applied by designer Tom Wilkes. It would be his choice of the typeface that became integral to the album’s visual signature. Both the title and artist’s credit are set in the Torino letterform, named for the city of Turin where Alessandro Butti perfected this particular font family in 1908 at Nebiolo, Italy’s premier type foundry of the twentieth century. The Flair variant of italicized Torino was utilized by Wilkes to generate the curling, flowery lines

peculiar to specific letters' descender strokes, effectively branding Parks' debut with typographic flourishes very much of a piece with the album's ornate arrangements. Nearly three decades down the track, The High Llamas, a UK band formed by Sean O'Hagan in the '90s, wore their affection for Southern Californian pop literally on their sleeve, setting the title of their 1994 *Gideon Gaye* album in Torino Italic Flair in obvious homage to *Song Cycle*.

Parks' first album did not include printed lyrics. This was a shame, given that between the electronic signal processing to which his voice is subjected and the expansive sweep of instrumental arrangements through much of *Song Cycle*'s running time, the nuances of the record's lyrics are occasionally masked. In a concession to the faithful, Parks arranged the printing of a lyric sheet, available upon request to early purchasers of the album. It's a pity that his libretto wasn't tucked within the album's sleeve in the first place. In brilliant counterpoint to the high art allusions of the *Song Cycle* cover graphics, the lyric sheet resembles a vernacular form once well known to inhabitants of big cities: the diner menu printed only for that day's use. The heavier cream-toned paper stock, the bold type that deviates slightly from the leading of a given line, the occasional typo, all suggestive of menus offering "tuna in the can" and the cabbies who would order exactly that, day in and day out, at now-vanished chrome-edged lunch counters. The lyrics of *Song Cycle* addressed the past, among other things, and did so with poignancy; the paper that they were printed on simulated a fragment of that time.

To Market To Buy

Van Dyke Parks is generic . . . The first in a decade since Dylan and the Beatles! Already there is speculation among record critics, commentators and cognoscenti as to how and to what extent his emergence will influence tomorrow's tastes and trends. No matter your age, musical preferences or sociological point-of-view, it is uncommonly predictable, inevitable, inescapable: You are about to become involved with Van Dyke Parks!

—Warner Bros.-Seven Arts ad copy
in overdrive, coinciding with the
initial release of *Song Cycle*

Van Dyke's record is such a milestone, it's sailing straight into the Smithsonian Institute, completely bypassing the consumer.

—Warner Bros. Records-Seven Arts president Joe Smith (aka. “Our Mr. Smith”), sounding “a cautious note,” quoted one month later in the next hubris-lite iteration of *Song Cycle* advertisements

Song Cycle was completed and released in 1968. Reviewers connected with it first. Only the pouring of boiling water on an anthill could compare to the reactions of long-haired post-grad students in English departments across the country, the ones who moonlighted as rock critics, to the release of *Song Cycle*. Some of these writers were more coherent than others, as was the stylistic breadth allowed practitioners of New Journalism during the late '60s. Writers like *Rolling Stone*'s J. R. Young devised short cryptic stories, often with creepy overtones, that mentioned the object of the review perhaps only in passing, yet offered commentary on the sly. Other writers felt compelled to go toe-to-toe with Parks in conflating flowery-unto-purple prose, possibly with a mind to contacting Parks and alerting the composer that he was not alone in the world, that others could speak his arcane language, a retooling of William Jennings Bryan's oratory for the present (read: stoned) day. While many such write-ups left readers scratching heads and record companies no more profitable than before, some did the job by virtue of sheer un-answerability.

One such notice appeared in Paul Williams' journal of intellectually rigorous rock criticism, *Crawdaddy!*. A review of *Song Cycle* appeared as a cover story in issue 14, written by Sandy Pearlman, the future producer of Blue Oyster Cult and the Clash's second album. His intentions were good at the outset. He cited salient points in Parks' personal history. Readers might first have detected a whiff of sulfur in the air when Pearlman's review wandered into a consideration of artist Marcel Duchamp and his ready-made sculptures. In the next moment, Pearlman invoked

a laundry list of composers from both pop and classical domains and the whole incomprehensible macédoine of cultural references boiled down to a consideration of *Song Cycle's* relationship to silence and the posited notion that Parks' album may be the greatest work of Muzak (yes, the faint innocuous stuff in elevators) to date. Another critic prone to inflammatory statement, Richard Meltzer, also weighed in favorably on the Muzak comparison. Where these writers were headed with such comparisons was anyone's guess. Muzak . . . because there's a string section? And no electric lead guitar to speak of? *Song Cycle* generated much writing of this stripe. Amazingly, some of these reviews, perhaps because of their incomprehensible cant, actually drew the mystically inclined and/or the very, very high to seek out and purchase the record.

Though reviewers tended for the most part to extol the music's merits, they had all received their copies for free (and the cost of manufacturing and mailing those review copies is traditionally billed — or "cross-collateralized" — against the artist's earnings). The gleeful tenor of these reviews might have emboldened hope for the album's prospects in the marketplace, but within the company there were warning flags raised early in its marketing campaign, based on feedback from retail and radio station music directors. Joe Smith, the label's own president, was largely mystified by the record's content; this was hardly a good sign. As a former disc jockey, Smith was rooted foursquare in a pop mentality and was the first to admit as much. He didn't know what the title meant and was at a loss to discern what elements of the album would appeal to consumers. From his standpoint, "Intellectual critics

could relate to [*Song Cycle*], but no one else could.”

To his credit, Smith tried examining the album from many angles, like a jeweler holding a cut stone up to the light, wondering if it was a diamond or just a better grade of Czechoslovakian rhinestone. He couldn’t hum along to it, he knew that much. Was there a melody lurking in there, he wondered, something that he hadn’t found yet? Smith’s concerns were bounced back at him, amplified, by his marketing staff, most of them not liking the record either, according to Smith. The lion’s share of record store employees canvassed by Warner Bros. field reps were baffled by the thing. Radio wouldn’t touch it, or at very least didn’t know how to touch it.

“*Song Cycle* was unusual listening. We were used to anything, or so we thought,” Smith continues, “But *Song Cycle* was a strange experience. I could ask the Grateful Dead to do something shorter than 23 minutes, with a mind to getting airplay, but we couldn’t get a radio station to play this *Song Cycle*. We had such resistance from radio. FM wasn’t that much of a factor then. What category did it fit into?”

Smith’s concerns were grounded in reality. WABX, the FM station nestled atop Detroit’s downtown skyline, was a hive of subversive playlists, a bastion of anti-commercial rock in the late ’60s. The Velvet Underground couldn’t get themselves heard on New York radio, and in protest didn’t play in their hometown for the balance of the ’60s, until their final stand at Max’s Kansas City. They were, however, a presence on Detroit’s FM radio. Several of the more adventuresome selections made by the “Air Aces” of WABX were in fact clients of the producer who oversaw

the first singles recorded by Van Dyke Parks, Tom Wilson (among these, the Velvets, the Mothers of Invention, and the Japanese love child named Harumi whose eponymous double album was helmed by Wilson). There was no shortage of what young Detroiters lovingly designated as “weirdness” on their favorite station. I was a constant listener to WABX in its heyday, through the final quarter of the ’60s; you couldn’t calculate the station’s influence on my subsequent musical enthusiasms and the engendering of a drive to find new and more exotic musical phyla. Still, for all of the influence it exerted, I never once heard *Song Cycle* played on WABX.

While most of the FM radio audience didn’t hear it, there was general awareness of the record. Warners’ ad campaign made an inescapable case for the record. The initial brace of ads (the copy for one such is quoted earlier) sent a message that was uncompromising, not atypical of hyperbole-driven ads of that time. The effect could be off-putting. The ad design was prosaic, combining a fraction of the cover photo with blocks of over-heated copy.

It was when the chips were down, when the very low sales of *Song Cycle* began to plateau, that another iteration of full-paged ads for the album hit music and hippie lifestyle publications en masse. The second wave *Song Cycle* ad was controversial by design, as were many others conceived and designed by Warners’ Director of Creative Services, a former copywriter named Stan Cornyn. His impatience with the ordinary began in the same instant that he began to work in record advertising in 1962.

“My boss said he was taking a sabbatical, so I was asked to do ads. Looked at ads in the trades — *Billboard*, *Cashbox*

and the like — and found they were all forgettable. You'd look at a picture of Tony Bennett and Columbia would write at the top of the ad 'Rocketing up the charts' and then there'd be the name of the single and its chart position. That was it. Nobody remembered that. I thought, We've got to . . . get people's attention. The rest was just my sassy attitude toward life. I was utterly unschooled in anything like the craft of Madison Avenue."

Cornyn met Van Dyke Parks directly upon Parks' signing with the label. Cornyn had already initiated what he deemed his "artist-loving ads." His ad copy balanced an intelligent, companionable demeanor with bracing jolts of irreverence. "One after another, my new kind of artist-loving ads (and posters and buttons and inscribed toilet tissue) rolled out of Burbank. Recently divorced, I wrote this stuff on the weekends when, alone with my yellow tablet and too much time on my hands, I self-amused."

Ed Thrasher's department devised a clean, matter-of-fact staging for Stan Cornyn's subversive copy, with distinctive use of Helvetica, the font designed by Max Miedinger and Eduard Hoffmann that would soon take over the world. Within this grown-up, nearly avant-garde presentation, Cornyn would do his level best to *épater les bourgeois* and enlist their bored children as co-conspirators in the same go. Many of his ads were terrifically funny: a typical Cornyn ad offered bags of Topanga Canyon dirt to purchasers of Neil Young's first album. Joni Mitchell expressed chagrin at a series of Cornyn ads she deemed sexist; the copy for one read: "JONI MITCHELL TAKES FOREVER," followed by "JONI MITCHELL IS 90% VIRGIN." Cornyn had no way to know that Mitchell had

to give a baby up for adoption at the outset of her career, not so long before. He promised he'd never repeat such headlines. He was, however, not about to waste an idea simply because of inappropriate timing. A Cornyn quote from his autobiographical *Exploding* affords insight into the ecology of his working methods: "When time came for a trade ad for Sinatra, I wanted to complain about how little airplay he'd been getting. I knew a good headline: FRANK SINATRA IS 90% VIRGIN."

The graphics of Warner/Reprise ads enhanced the company's smart aspect. Cornyn's team, by his own description, "Just had fun all the time. The Creative Services group had this flip attitude, flip with the intention of getting attention for the artist, for the album, for the company."

"When Parks was first signed to Warners," Cornyn remembers, "I bumped into this boyish young man. He started to move his mouth and it was unlike any of the other artists we had. He was articulate, a little mystical . . . as in, I don't know where he was going with that paragraph. It was nice to meet an artist with a vocabulary. That was something that appealed to me. Others in the company might have asked, 'What's that?' I think he'd been hanging out downstairs around Lenny, but when I first met Van Dyke I liked him immediately. This had nothing to do at this point with his music. That stuck through the whole [marketing of *Song Cycle*]. I kept trying to figure out what his sentences meant. That was kind of a challenge, maybe still is. I think he was relieved to find someone who didn't shrug, smile and walk away. I didn't. I think there was some sort of connection there, one that seemed to work very well.

“So when he started to make this album,” Cornyn continues, “Either he or Lenny invited me to the studio in Hollywood — Warners not having their own studio at this time — a really little place somewhere in Hollywood. I sat there for an hour or so and listened. I found the music different, artistic and absorbing. Lenny saw me in the hallway the next day and he asked what I thought of Van Dyke’s recording. I told him that I missed the sound of a rhythm section; Lenny said that was simply the way Van Dyke is, you have to assume the rhythm. Lenny, as always, was nice and I was, as always, naïve about my reactions to these things. It was interesting and different, which I appreciated because in that company you could get filled up with the fashion for singles and rhythm and so on. It was refreshing. Hey, I was a college graduate, I had lived in France, and I appreciated the arts.”

So it was that Stan Cornyn became an early fan of *Song Cycle*.

“When I heard the finished record I found it absorbing, but occasionally quirky. One of the songs is at half volume. Why? I don’t know [laughs] But it was unique, eccentric by the standards of any artist we were putting out at the time. I could get very bored sometimes with the music we were putting out, though I continued to write about it with enthusiasm and sassiness.

“Van Dyke was not consulted in the marketing. For the stuff I did, liner notes, ads, I didn’t consult with any artist, not even Frank Sinatra, who was the most dangerous artist in our roster. I guess if Van Dyke was left alone, I was left alone. I had bosses to the extent that there were people in the building that I hung out with, went to lunch

with at Kosherama down the street. I did what I wanted to do. I don't know if Van Dyke secretly didn't like those ads. I think he put up with it because, to some small extent, we were alike. But I never cleared anything with him."

The second iteration of the ad campaign for *Song Cycle* emphasized the album's cost; Cornyn developed, in his words, "a pissed-off trade ad for *Billboard*, lamenting HOW WE LOST \$39,509.50 ON THE ALBUM OF THE YEAR." The ads could be read as indictments of Parks' evidently spendthrift approach to working in the studio. Though Brian Wilson almost certainly spent more money on recent Beach Boys sessions, by producer Lenny Waronker's estimation, Wilson had the power base and the income to justify the outlay of cash. Parks was an untried commodity. His expensively produced album, while not exactly "stone cold dead in the market" (to cite Wilmoth Houdini's calypso song) certainly had been ignored to a marked extent by its intended audience. Warners did look good in Cornyn's copy: a big corporation flexing their philanthropic muscles on behalf of genuine Art, in spite of said corporation taking a bath on the project.

(As described by Fred Goodman in his account of pop music's boom years, *Mansion on the Hill*, when Parks got wind of the ad campaign bemoaning Warners' inability to sell either his album or Randy Newman's solo debut [which Parks co-produced], the artist accused Cornyn of ruining his career.)

The consumers with an evangelical bent, those individuals who in later years would be identified by marketing executives as "cultural creatives," responded in

How we lost \$35,509.50 on "The Album of the Year" (Dammit)

Here's what we did. Put out Van Dyke Parks' "Song Cycle."

Enough said? Hardly.

But first, don't worry about us (Warner Bros.-Seven Arts Records). We're not hurling for the \$35 thou. We sell enough Petula and Cosby and Association, we can afford a Van Dyke Parks.

Our Mr. Waronker, who produced the album, specializes in producing tough sell stuff like this LP and Randy Newman's. Our Mr. Waronker and the World's Mr. Parks created "Song Cycle." And it cost us \$35 thou. The bills came in, it cost us \$48,302. And that's not adding in a lot of things we could add in.

We gulped, and issued "Song Cycle." We issued it thumping our tutus and twisting your arms.

In response, here's what some of you said:

"A milestone in pop." — New York Magazine

"Song Cycle makes fuller use of recording studio techniques than any previous record." — Saturday Review

"The most important, creative, and advanced pop recording since Sgt. Pepper." — Jazz and Pop

"A milestone in the development of American popular music." — Chester

"A startling musical and artistic experience." — Women's Wear Daily

"High record of the year." — *Examiner*

"All shimmering beauty." — *Time*

"A high flying ear trip." — *The Free Press*

"One of the most important new records of the year." — *Sing Out*

"Record of the Year." — *Hi Fi Stereo Review*

"A milestone of American pop music." — *The New Yorker*

Boy oh boy. We knew that was the best \$48 thou we ever want for. Not even Santa Claus gets reviews like that.

We got set for *The Big Pay Off*.

(The song cautious note came from Our Mr. Smith. Our Mr. Smith takes a jaundiced view of Art. After about a month of tub thumping, Our Mr. Smith has come to realize that Van Dyke's album's such a milestone, it's sailing straight into The Smithsonian Institute, completely bypassing the consumer.)

O.M.S. was damn near right. We're still \$35 thou in the hole. To date, we've moved about 10,000 copies of Van's album. That's not enough.

To come to the point: "Song Cycle" is everything those review quotes say it is. Hearing "Song Cycle," we've heard the future, and predict it. More. So, if you've got the bucks, Enter Van Dyke Parks.

So doing will make Our Mr. West smile. West is our treasurer. Buy "The Album Of The

"Year" and, for free, he'll let you call him Ed. But don't do it out of worry for us. We're selling enough Peter, Paul and Mary and Mason Williams and Rod McKuen, we don't need your bucks.

But you shouldn't—honestly shouldn't—miss "The Album of the Year."



IT COST US \$48,302.

RICHARD HENDERSON

Two weeks later, and it still looks black for "The Album of the Year"

Two weeks ago, in this very space, we shoved it to you pretty good about Van Dyke Parks' album of the year that lost us \$35 thou. Apparently, not enough of you were paying attention, or are moved by our eloquence. Sales since haven't wiped out that \$35,505.50 loss. By a mile.

Apparently some of you don't believe things like:

"Not since Gershwin has someone so completely involved in the pop holocaust emerged with such a transcendent concept of what American music can be." Song Cycle is that album we have all been waiting for: an auspicious debut, a stunning work of pop art, a vital piece of Americana, and a damned good record to boot."

— Richard Goldstein in
The New York Times

You probably shouldn't believe reviews like that. Except when they happen over and over and over. To wit:

"I am suggesting not only that you buy this album, but that you listen, really listen to it."

— The New York Element

"...the most important art-rock product... a critical wowsler that sold zilch copies."

— The Los Angeles Free Press

"No less than the total American experience..." — *Discrepancy*

"I think you should own this record, and should invest some time listening to it... If there has been a more provocative, more intensely creative collection issued by any label in the past year — in "serious" music, pop, or jazz — I have not heard it."

— *American Record Guide*

"If it took seven months and the 78 persons named on the back cover to do all this, then it's been worth it." — *Cheekah*

"Van Dyke Parks may come to be considered the Gertrude Stein of the new pop music... Song Cycle presents us with the work of one of the greatest artists. Van Dyke Parks is their first. Listening to Song Cycle may not bring love but it most certainly will bring musical liberation." — *Rolling Stone*

"Very esoteric..." — *The Hollywood Reporter*

These raves, by the way, are all new raves, different from the seventeen raves we had two weeks ago. So you can see, we're not hurting for words.

Just for sales.

What we want, people, is some action. Some spreading of the good word. To assist you in this, we've come up with a deal.

For those of you who are already Parks fans and own the album of the year, we got a deal. You can get a second "Song Cycle" to pass on to a poor but open friend. Our Mr. Cormyn's come up with:

OUR ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME VAN DYKE PARKS 16-SALE

Your Mr. CORMYN
Warner Bros./7 Arts Records
Burbank, California 91503

Dear Stan:

Yes, send me here Van Dyke Parks albums to replace my worn one. I enclose my old album (WS 1727) and a penny. I promise to pass the second one on to a poor but open friend. Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Not much of an offer?

Too hard to mail an album to Our Mr. Cormyn? Maybe so. We don't expect a flood of mail on this one. Look, we're already down for \$35 thou.

But, if you feel about Parks as we do, send in your old copy and a penny to Our Mr. Cormyn.

He'll get right back to you.



a big way to this campaign. Unfortunately, one suspects that few of said creatives, no matter how sincere and all-consuming their enthusiasm, did any better selling their friends on the record than I have, down the years.

The final straw in the indignity that *Song Cycle* endured from the marketing campaign was the ad containing a by-now infamous gimmick: The “Once-In-A-Lifetime Van Dyke Parks 1¢ Sale.” In its copy, the friendly voice of Warner Bros. Records (being Stan Cornyn) spoke to readers, certain that if said reader owned *Song Cycle* already, that reader no doubt loved the thing to death already, playing the vinyl disc until it was thrashed. So, Warners’ entreaty went, just send back your beat-up copy plus a penny “to Our Mr. Cornyn” and the label would return a fresh copy of the album plus an additional one “to pass on to a poor but open friend.” Cornyn invented a form of viral vinyl evangelism, one that he recalls maybe only a hundred people buying into. This may have been just as well: though a good idea on one level, the manufactured copies dispensed for free and for one penny, respectively, were still being billed back to the artist’s account at the cost of manufacture. Sometimes a great notion . . .

Later, tracks from *Song Cycle* and other independent Parks recording projects, like TV scoring assignments that he had performed on his new Moog synthesizer for Ice Capades or Datsun car commercials, turned up on the Loss Leader series of double album releases. These were another brainchild of Creative Services, available by mail order to consumers who needed only to part with the cost of shipping and nothing more. The first two of these double-LP packages, *Songbook* and *Record*

Show, were beautifully designed and spanned the gamut of what was by 1969 a deeply eclectic roster at Warner/Reprise. Putting Parks rarities on these records continued to draw attention, with attendant copy likening the idea of Van Dyke Parks doing TV commercial music to that of Buckminster Fuller tightening bolts in an aircraft factory. Cornyn made sure that *Song Cycle* tracks and even an MGM single by Parks were included on each of these annual sampler releases well into the '70s.

Cornyn's modus was direct and bulletproof: "Getting the name, getting the attention, making them like both the artist and the company. 'Van Dyke Parks is on Warner Bros. Records, where he belongs.' Making the point that this is the kind of company we'd like to be with."

Constant Commentary By The Wayside

I sat with Denny Brooks under an immense Chinese elm as the Southern California sun deflated placid beyond an expanse of broad lawn and Los Angeles Harbor's water quality. We'd transected coffeehouse and sandbox from 1961 as he whirled single-handedly through an array of Latin American and Anglo folk tune reminiscence. An incomplete American Revolution seized on mimetic gifts before the Byrds took to electric reflections.

Fall foliage quiets thoughts of the next spring, when Denny will be aloud with blossom, encouraged to raise a unique Southern California song. As the medium is just the medium, Denny will be displayed more deeply to keener senses. You can just hear it now, built into a talented friendship dynamic.

Somewhat more emphatic than the last outstanding critical review are some good vibes, and less simply, the foresight of generosity. Get on with it.

—Van Dyke Parks, September 1969
(liner notes from the Warner Bros.-
Seven Arts release, *Denny Brooks*)

In 2002, Kees Colenbrander filmed *Van Dyke Parks: Een Obsessie Voor Muziek*, a documentary about Van Dyke Parks for Dutch television. Each of Colenbrander's interview subjects was American, but both their subtitles and the film's narration were entirely in Dutch. For an English-speaking viewer, it's more than a little unsettling to suddenly hear the words 'complete flop' as the voiceover obviously describes the fate of *Song Cycle*. Failure evidently generates its own Esperanto, a damning indictment that reads more and less the same regardless of where one lives.

Parks did not lack for the vaulting ambition required of a successful solo artist, but as previously noted, he harbored ambivalence about his solo career. In the wake of *Song Cycle*'s disappointing sales performance, he spent little time licking his wounds, preferring to get on with work. The studio remained his natural habitat, he could communicate with the best players in town as a sensitive and articulate equal, then turn and address label executives in *their* language. In the moment, irrespective of his album's destiny, Parks was still a musician with a unique skill set; further opportunities lay just ahead.

Lenny Waronker had signed two new acts to the Warners roster. One was his childhood friend Randy

Newman, who had been a staff writer at Metric Music after studying music at UCLA (though by Newman's own admission, if he couldn't find parking easily at UCLA, he tended to keep driving and cut class). Newman's talent had appealed to Parks as well, leading Van Dyke to commission "Vine Street" for *Song Cycle*. It had also attracted the ear of Beatles producer George Martin. In his autobiography, *All You Need is Ears*, Martin recalls looking up Newman while visiting Los Angeles, only to find young Randy doing arrangements at Metric Music, seated in a cubicle like someone in the secretarial pool. Now Newman was going to get his own shot at solo stardom with an album to be co-produced by Parks and Waronker.

Randy Newman did little better than *Song Cycle* upon its 1969 release. The cover art was swapped out and the record was reissued post-haste, to the same non-reaction. It was thought that perhaps the orchestral arrangements, which often invoked the work of legendary film score composer (and Randy's uncle) Alfred Newman, proved too stodgy for young, anti-establishment buyers. Despite this, the quantum kernels of Newman's appeal were in place: his impressive piano playing, the sad-sack approximation of Fats Domino's singing style and the mordant wit threaded through songs like "Davy The Fat Boy." To Parks' disappointment, the orchestral accompaniment was jettisoned for Newman's sophomore collection, *12 Songs*, as was co-producer Parks himself.

Nearly in the same month as Newman's release, the guitarist Ry Cooder was signed to do a collection of rootsy material with a stylized presentation. Previously

participating in Terry Melcher-produced sessions alongside Parks, Cooder's slide guitar was key to Jack Nitzsche's revolutionary and deeply unsettling score for the Mick Jagger vehicle *Performance*. The film was released by Warner Bros., with its soundtrack issued by the company's record label; as such, Cooder was very much on Warners' radar. He was a deeply straight figure, unusual for his time, with a no-nonsense approach to the pursuit of his own career opportunities. Jack Nitzsche brought him into the Warners fold (Cooder had played on Neil Young's 1969 debut, also arranged by Nitzsche), but Cooder passed on Nitzsche as the producer for the former's first solo record, portraying the increasing drug-friendly Nitzsche as being insufficiently together for the job. Co-producing with Lenny Waronker as he had on Randy Newman's first record, Van Dyke crafted arrangements, notably for the Singer-Zanet classic "One Meat Ball," which seated the sly, picaresque character of Cooder's slide guitar and mandolin within grand, sweeping accompaniments that recalled the scores composed for Warner Bros. films by the likes of Erich von Korngold.

The cover art for *Ry Cooder* presented a reasonable case for truth in advertising, framing the young guitarist in cape and slouch hat leaning against an Airstream trailer at dawn in the desert. Just as stylized was the musical palette formulated by Cooder and his producers, mapping the full history of slide guitar onto the timeless sentiments of Tin Pan Alley chestnuts, by way of Berthold Brecht. Unfortunately, Cooder felt his first Reprise album somewhat over-decorated, opting for funkier band arrangements on his 1972 sophomore outing, *Into The*

Purple Valley. Again, Lenny Waronker returned as the album's sole producer.

The Parks and Waronker production team experienced something like success with a third client, the folk singer Arlo Guthrie. *Running Down The Road*, with its cast of first-call Los Angeles session players (including Ry Cooder on guitar), successfully introduced Guthrie to underground rock audiences, balancing folk standards with newer tunes cut in the manner of Bob Dylan's late '60s material. *Running* contained "Coming Into Los Angeles," a minor topical hit for Guthrie, recounting a dope smuggler's paranoia in song.

Van Dyke Parks may not have set the planet on fire as a solo act, but he kept busy at Warners all the same, having been brought in-house as an executive when the '70s began. Mo Ostin, now head of the expanded Warner/Reprise label group, responded to Parks' suggestions for an alternative revenue stream that could be generated by musicians without constantly having to be on the road. Parks had witnessed several of his contemporaries meeting untimely ends as the result of relentless touring. Couldn't promotional films of the label's acts, he wondered, be shot and distributed in place of live performance? Sensing an idea whose time had arrived, Warners established Audio-Visual Services to give form to Parks' noble idea, creating short films in service of acts central to the label's eclectic vision, like Joni Mitchell and Earth, Wind & Fire. The films created for Mitchell and Frank Zappa played as short subjects before Warner Bros. feature films in mainstream cinemas, these being best-case working examples of Parks' vision properly applied (and

paying for itself). Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band executed a black-and-white vignette in service of their “Lick My Decals Off,” evoking the spirit of Man Ray’s surrealist film *Emak Bakia* with Dadaist non sequitur; the Beefheart film got few screenings on commercial television, but landed in the collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Another short commissioned by Parks played off the “itinerant guitarist lounging against Airstream trailer” cover motif of Ry Cooder’s solo debut. A combination of set pieces and concert footage, the film begins with Cooder emerging from the Airstream amidst the flowered splendor of the hills surrounding Ojai, California. The guitarist wanted to know what his next line should be; Parks responded, “Man, you tell me.” Cooder merely repeated the line on camera, and in so doing preserved a scintilla of the eccentric spirit that launched both Parks’ and his own careers at Warners.

While in the Audio-Visual Services office, Parks addressed a memorandum to Mo Ostin, declaring (in language later used to brand the first successful music video network) “I want my music television.” The acronym MTV also appeared for the first time in a similar Parks memo to Ostin. As Parks tells it, “I was directly under Mo Ostin at WB Records (both architecturally, and on the Corporate Organization Chart. I answered to only one man. That was Mo). I had memos printed: ‘From the Director of Audio-Visual Services— re:_____,’ and ‘Yes____’ or ‘No____.’ It got things done, that memo.”

Early in the course of Parks’ new duties was an interesting encounter with film producer Fred Weintraub. “[Weintraub] was in a dilemma. He needed 10,000 feet

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of raw-stock to shoot a documentary at the upcoming Woodstock Festival. He couldn't reach Mo Ostin. I did, and in no time flat John Calley [then president of Warner Bros. Pictures] delivered the film stock. Mo believed me. No question, I was point man on that move to bottle the counter-culture. Warner Brothers was in a key position for the soundtrack rights. A few days later, some kid worth a million bucks walked into the office to discuss a music video. He was having a fabulous hair day and played loud guitar music. As he parted, he quipped ‘. . . and don’t get caught up in the machinery, man.’” Parks concluded his reminiscence of the run-up to Woodstock by stating, “I had other priorities than queuing at a rock concert’s mud flat latrine. And, I didn’t get caught up in the machinery.”

What Is Up The Canyon Will Eventually Come Down

As the '70s bore on, a growing sense of estrangement seeped under the door of Parks' office at Warners. He had completed a second album for the label, 1972's calypso-inflected *Discover America*, a catalog sweep on Trinidadian classics with sonic treatments and signature arrangements that made the record every bit a Parks vehicle. He had availed himself of the opportunity to visit Trinidad at the turn of the decade, witnessing the bandsmen in competition during Carnival and reacquainting himself with the culture that he had come to know first while playing with his brother in Seal Beach in the early '60s, where Andrew de la Bastide and his steel drum orchestra often shared bills with the Steeltown Two.

Unfortunately, Warner/Reprise was finding that, in spite of the quality of films generated by Parks' office, there were few venues at that time to screen them. It became more difficult to rationalize the expense involved. These promotional films, despite the acceptable example set by the Zappa and Joni Mitchell films, were deemed

cost-inefficient on the whole. The office was dissolved, with Parks orphaned by the company whose image he had helped to shape in the late '60s. He continued to record for the label, and Warners took interest in and released some of Parks' subsequent productions but, in a manner of speaking, he had been disinherited from the golf foursome.

In this new decade, Van Dyke Parks would revisit his affinity for the sounds of Trinidad. The Esso Trinidad Steel Band became production clients for an album of covers ("Apeman" by the Kinks' Ray Davies, the Jackson Five's "I Want You Back") whose 1971 release on Warner Bros. Records was arranged by Parks. Another lightning-strike session (both figuratively and literally, as it was done in a day while a hurricane passed over Miami) was *Hot & Sweet*, from 1974, a collection of calypso anthems sung by the venerated singer The Mighty Sparrow. Parks worked on these productions in conjunction with Andrew Wickham, an expatriate Englishman who had been hired at the Monterey Festival to serve as a "house hippie," a liaison to street culture for Warners.

Parks performed songs on *Discover America* by two songwriters whom he had come to admire: the brilliant New Orleans keyboard player and producer Allen Toussaint and Lowell George, best known as a founding member of Little Feat, whose Warners albums showcased both George's idiosyncratic approach to slide guitar and his bottomless passion for swampy funk-infused melodies. Parks would in time produce both artists. Having brought Toussaint to Warner Bros. attention via his own recordings, Parks travelled to Louisiana to work on Toussaint's

1975 solo LP *Southern Nights*. Though Parks was sharped out of his production credit by Toussaint's management, the shape and sound of Parks' earlier work informs the beguiling *Southern Nights*. Brief shards of songs function as bridging devices, sequenced as reprises throughout the album's running order, and a pervasive sense of drama threads throughout the set, distinct from Toussaint's other solo discs for Warners. Parks' fingerprints, recognizable from *Song Cycle*, are all over *Southern Nights*. While credited as "tail gunner" on Little Feat albums such as *Feets Don't Fail Me Now*, his friendship and songwriting partnership with Lowell George was the main bond between Parks and the band. George died prematurely in 1977, on the heels of finishing his first solo LP, *Thanks, I'll Eat It Here*.

Noteworthy also from this mid-'70s period are the sessions conducted in partnership with Harry Nilsson. Once a golden-voiced, handsome pop troubadour with a string of successful albums in the '60s, the following decade had seen Nilsson turn dissolute in the wake of his platinum success with 1971's *Nilsson Schmilsson*. His later records for the RCA label became, more or less, documented parties with scores of the well-heeled and wasted dropping by the studio to contribute. Nilsson found a helpful workmate in the person of Van Dyke Parks, whose Caribbean affinities agreed with Nilsson's own buoyant wit. Parks could organize a coherent session when liquor and cocaine-inspired chaos threatened to void productivity. *Duit On Mon Dei* was a high point for the melding of Nilsson's and Parks' minds; the keyboard playing and arrangements for steel drums and strings plays like an

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equally impish extension of *Discover America*'s spirited adaptations. (Having noted as much, one can't ignore the first response of Nilsson's mother to the album: "Harry, I can hear the ice cubes clinking.") Later the two would travel to the island of Malta to collaborate on the score for Robert Altman's imaginatively dark, Brechtian film adaptation of *Popeye*. Parks appeared onscreen as the town pianist in *Popeye's Sweethaven*; in 2002, samples of his arrangements for Nilsson's *Popeye* songs were intrinsic to composer Jon Brion's score for Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love*.

Time Is Not The Main Thought

Always give the most serious consideration to the unexpected.

—Van Dyke Parks

The mid and late '70s began a period of dislocation and rootlessness for Parks. Though he'd remarried and begun a new family, his connection to his adopted home of Los Angeles had grown tenuous. He put out a third album for Warners, *Clang Of The Yankee Reaper*, in 1976, co-produced by Andrew Wickham and Trevor Lawrence. As with its predecessor, Parks revisited calypso, reframing a brace of Trinidadian favorites with his take on the legacy of England's presence in the Caribbean; this interest also informed the lyrics of the title track, the lone Parks original in the lineup. Again, as on *Discover America*, his transformative arrangements stamped these vintage tunes with the authorship of Parks the modernist, creating the next best thing to a collection of songs bearing his own writing credit.

The record featured an uncharacteristically small

ensemble; though his admirers were grateful for another Parks release after yet another gap of four years, the evidence of a straightened production budget was hard to ignore. The substitution of an ARP string synthesizer, a '70s innovation whose sugary timbre was heard everywhere from Nashville to MOR (middle of the road) singles by the Carpenters, in place of a proper string section was indicative of the cut-price nature of these sessions. In addition to budget constraints, Parks suffered the unexpected loss of one of his closest friends, who died prior to the album's recording. Dispirited, he went through the motions in order to deliver and promote the product, even agreeing to a rare live date at the Cocoanut Grove nightclub within Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel. The album's performances worked to summon the equatorial brio of yore, its sleeve art typically sumptuous, but the record as a whole seemed vitamin-deficient. It is the one item in his catalog that Parks now disowns, calling *Clang* . . . "brain-dead."

Later, while wood-shedding in the mountains of the southeast, the call came from a longtime fan, Jack Nicholson, requesting that Parks score *Goin' South*, a 1978 film starring and directed by the Oscar-winning actor. The opportunity occasioned Parks' return to Los Angeles and the beginning of a new career as a film composer. Of course, it's the chameleons that do best in Hollywood film production, where the governing paradigm might best be summed in the phrase "We love you, now change." Parks' versatility has enabled his survival in the world of music for media, but only occasionally do the themes and familiar harmonic and rhythmic motives of his earlier solo work survive onscreen. *Goin' South*, its plot purposefully

inverting the Old West's mythology, may still be the Van Dyke Parks film score that most closely resembles *Song Cycle*. The unusual instrumental combinations, the tack piano interludes that might play perfectly in a silent movie theater, the meld of giddiness and heartbreak steeped in a fascination with American history, all are present to elevate what may not be a perfect film, but one that at least is that much more enjoyable with the sound turned up.

Parks experienced an uptick in his on-again, off-again solo career, beginning in the early '80s with *Jump!*, the soundtrack to a musical conceived by Parks, based on the writings of Joel Chandler Harris, author of the Uncle Remus stories, a character sprung from African-American oral traditions. Each of the 11 songs comprising his 1984 release evidenced renewed inspiration in Parks' writing, their orchestrations presented in an acoustic format that hearkened back to an American landscape where brass bands performed in park band shells, a time of courtly behavior and dignity. The ingenuity and spunk of Harris' characters, especially that of his trickster hero Br'er Rabbit, survived in Parks' libretto and was amplified, figuratively speaking, in the vivacious melodies that animated his retelling in song of the work originally written by Harris, deemed "the only master [of writing in African-American dialect] this country has produced" by no less than Mark Twain. Parks was the author of three children's books based on Harris' stories. Respectively titled *Jump!*, *Jump Again!* and *Jump On Over!*, each of these was illustrated by Barry Moser, with the first volume netting a 1986 Caldecott Medal for excellence in

illustrated children's books.

With his 1989 release, *Tokyo Rose*, Parks picked up the thread of his investigation into Japanese-American relations begun with *Song Cycle*'s "Pot Pourri." The album, engineered to audiophile standards by Doug Botnick, featured Parks' comic turn on the album cover as a sailor lofted by the wake of a passing whale. This was followed, in not so many years, by a well-received reunion with Brian Wilson, the former Beach Boy overdubbing block harmonies that helped cement the worth of *Orange Crate Art*. The title track from the 1995 collection figures among Parks' best compositions; it achieved new luster via the writer's own rendition on his 1998 live set, *Moonlighting: Live At The Ash Grove*.

The score for a 2003 film, *The Adventures of Ociee Nash*, allowed Parks the opportunity to indulge once more his fondness for string arrangements informed by vernacular melodies. The score works in much the same fashion as his best solo work, both following in the footsteps of one of Parks' favorite composers, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, a nineteenth-century visionary American composer who sought to create symphonic works from the musical stem cells of folk culture. In Gottschalk's case, he drew upon the remnants of African music preserved by the descendants of slaves, intrinsic to the music of Louisiana, that unique landscape to which both Parks and Gottschalk had ties. Parks' film score, winsome and colored with civility and languor, may be the closest he has come to date in emulating Gottschalk's working methods with such affecting results.

It would appear that there are second acts in American

lives. Indeed there are third, fourth and numerous more acts beyond the usual allotment, if only to judge from the array of musical collaborators Van Dyke Parks has engaged during the past quarter-century. Of course, in addition to his writing for film and theater, there are the periodic installments of his ongoing solo career, resembling as it always has a comet's elliptical orbit. Parks remains in demand as both a composer and an arranger. In the latter capacity, he has consistently imbued the work of others with a harmonic palette that springs fully featured from the imagination of a singular, and singularly talented character.

Songs by Victoria Williams, Sam Phillips, Rufus Wainwright and Joanna Newsom all are richer for Parks' involvement and sympathetic assistance. The Newsom project was unusual by design, five long-form songs whose lyrics concerned, variously, monkeys and bears and astronomy and loneliness, each of these accompanied by Newsom's harp within orchestral settings designed by Parks. It was a commendable move on her part: already a darling of the indie-rock set, she opted to explore a format that held the very real possibility of alienating the audience she had accrued to date. The album, *Ys*, appeared in 2006 to universally sterling notices, with Parks receiving his fair share of praise. In much of the press generated by her second album, Newsom pointed to her affection for *Song Cycle* as reason enough to enlist Parks as a collaborator.

Not so long after *Ys* came the opportunity to work with Inara George, daughter of Parks' departed friend Lowell, who had been the creative mainspring of Little

Feat. Though it has all the earmarks of a side project — Ms. George is one-half of The Bird and The Bee, that group's well-received sound an amalgam of tropicalia and dance mixes — *An Invitation*, the album that pairs her voice and his arrangements, is something for the ages, possibly a soundtrack to the next generation of sophisticated screwball comedies, should Hollywood ever decide to revive the form. George's idiosyncratic accounts of personal setbacks and triumphs are wrapped in the sonorities of Parks' pocket orchestra. It feels uptown posh and downtown bohemian in the same go, as does all of Parks' best work.

Parks continues to work in the company of musicians from his own birth cohort: Touring in tandem with Loudon Wainwright III; deputized as pianist for an evening with Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks; even reuniting with a healthier Brian Wilson to complete the work of *SMiLE*, nearly four decades after the project collapsed. This last item is all the more remarkable as the audience for *SMiLE* was still there, in force; evidently a great many humans possess infinite patience where the work of Messrs. Wilson and Parks is concerned. William Faulkner was right all along: *The past is never dead. It's not even past.*

At this point I'll stop to consider recent developments in the careers of Van Dyke Parks, Ry Cooder and Randy Newman, the three solo acts whose defining presence gave Warner Bros. Records (and by extension, Mo Ostin's and Lenny Waronker's latter-day imprint, DreamWorks Records) its reputation as a nurturing environment for those unafraid to make intelligent, left-of-center pop music. Both Randy Newman and Ry Cooder have enjoyed

hit records; their scores for successful films have nearly overshadowed their respective discographies as solo artists. For all of that, the audiences for both men would appear to be aging alongside them. (Of course, I can't speak for the brand awareness of little kids singing along to the Randy Newman songs written for films such as *Toy Story* or *Monsters, Inc.*) Ry Cooder, even as he branches off into fiction writing, moves from strength to strength in the more recent music of his solo career; *I, Flathead* arguably contains his best writing and playing to date, yet the demographic for both his and Newman's audience skews ever older.

Van Dyke Parks, on the other hand, has never connected with cash-cow projects on par with either of his former label-mates' late period successes. However, Parks' stock with younger musicians and listeners remains high. Parks' reputation as a talented iconoclast, as an artist who actually can wear the term "genius" with justifiable comfort, seems to enjoy seasonal burnishing. Newer generations of musicians turn up on his doormat, wanting to enrich their own work with the imagination that created *Song Cycle*. This may not put a lap pool in the backyard, but one would like to think that Parks' role as éminence grise for the next batch of creative troublemakers yields its own form of dividend.

That Brought Us Coots To Hoot

I first met Van Dyke Parks in the early '90s. He and his family lived on a sylvan cul-de-sac not far from an intersection that showed Hollywood at its grubbiest. Owing to a freak aspect of Los Angeles topography, though the mean streets were but measurable yards away, the Parks' neighborhood was distinct from its surroundings by dint of its elevation on a small bluff. Their block was calm and green, as oases should be.

Parks had converted a guesthouse in the backyard for his music studio. The first time I visited, I noticed the framed photo of a racing greyhound; beneath the dog's image was a small plaque bearing the name "Van Dyke Parks."

Of course, this piqued my curiosity. Van Dyke explained that a businessman who raised and raced greyhounds in Florida was a fan of Californian pop music. The guy owned three dogs that each made good showings at the track. He'd named them after his favorite recording artists: Van Dyke Parks, Randy Newman and Harry

RICHARD HENDERSON

Nilsson. Parks had asked the breeder which dog was the fastest. Turned out that Randy Newman was far and away the champion of the pack. Van Dyke mentioned this to Harry Nilsson, who in turn demanded a canine urine test.

Postscript: Lenny Waronker, producer

I didn't have to fight City Hall to get [*Song Cycle*] made. Van Dyke wanted something specific and I was able to provide that as an executive of the company. I could have denied him, but I wasn't about to do that.

[Regarding charges of self-indulgence:] There's another guilty person there and I'm the one. It could have been argued and fought over, but I didn't want to stand in Van Dyke's way.

[The commercial disappointment of *Song Cycle*] was tough on Van Dyke. He was very much aware of what he had done and he had to take the brunt of it. There was the two of us, neither with much experience, and I should have taken a chunk of that myself, in terms of being blamed for it.

There was disappointment in the album's lack of success, that it was not accepted as a sales item. I know Van Dyke was very disappointed about that. I kept thinking, we've made a mark, this record will have its day in court. But it was worthwhile to both of our careers and it was great for Warner Brothers.

RICHARD HENDERSON

To be associated with *Song Cycle*, even now, is more important to me than 99% of the hit records I've been involved with.

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10. *Sign 'O' the Times* by Michaelangelo Matos
11. *The Velvet Underground and Nico* by Joe Harvard
12. *Let It Be* by Steve Matteo
13. *Live at the Apollo* by Douglas Wolk
14. *Aqualung* by Allan Moore
15. *OK Computer* by Dai Griffiths
16. *Let It Be* by Colin Meloy
17. *Led Zeppelin IV* by Erik Davis
18. *Exile on Main St.* by Bill Janovitz
19. *Pet Sounds* by Jim Fusilli
20. *Ramones* by Nicholas Rombes
21. *Armed Forces* by Franklin Bruno
22. *Murmur* by J. Niimi
23. *Grace* by Daphne Brooks
24. *Endroducing . . .* by Eliot Wilder
25. *Kick Out the Jams* by Don McLeese
26. *Low* by Hugo Wilcken
27. *Born in the U.S.A.* by Geoffrey Himes
28. *Music from Big Pink* by John Niven
29. *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* by Kim Cooper
30. *Paul's Boutique* by Dan LeRoy
31. *Doolittle* by Ben Sisario
32. *There's a Riot Goin' On* by Miles Marshall Lewis
33. *The Stone Roses* by Alex Green
34. *In Utero* by Gillian G. Gaar
35. *Highway 61 Revisited* by Mark Polizzotti
36. *Loveless* by Mike McGonigal
37. *The Who Sell Out* by John Dougan
38. *Bee Thousand* by Marc Woodworth
39. *Daydream Nation* by Matthew Stearns
40. *Court and Spark* by Sean Nelson
41. *Use Your Illusion Vols 1 and 2* by Eric Weisbard
42. *Songs in the Key of Life* by Zeth Lundy
43. *The Notorious Byrd Brothers* by Ric Menck
44. *Trout Mask Replica* by Kevin Courrier
45. *Double Nickels on the Dime* by Michael T. Fournier
46. *Aja* by Don Breithaupt

47. *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* by Shawn Taylor
48. *Rid of Me* by Kate Schatz
49. *Achtung Baby* by Stephen Catanzarite
50. *If You're Feeling Sinister* by Scott Plagenhoef
51. *Pink Moon* by Amanda Petrusich
52. *Let's Talk About Love* by Carl Wilson
53. *Swordfishtrombones* by David Smay
54. *20 Jazz Funk Greats* by Drew Daniel
55. *Horses* by Philip Shaw
56. *Master of Reality* by John Darnielle
57. *Reign in Blood* by D. X. Ferris
58. *Shoot Out the Lights* by Hayden Childs
59. *Gentlemen* by Bob Gendron
60. *Rum, Sodomy & the Lash* by Jeffery T. Roesgen
61. *The Gilded Palace of Sin* by Bob Proehl
62. *Pink Flag* by Wilson Neate
63. *XO* by Matthew LeMay
64. *Illmatic* by Matthew Gasteier
65. *Radio City* by Bruce Eaton
66. *One Step Beyond . . .* by Terry Edwards
67. *Another Green World* by Geeta Dayal
68. *Zaireeka* by Mark Richardson
69. *69 Love Songs* by L. D. Beghtol
70. *Facing Future* by Dan Kois